

Marry Well and Stay Well-Married

“Till Death Do Us Part”

Richard A. Borg

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Instructions

1. For the best start, both you and your spouse should have your own copy and read together these: Instructions, the Introduction - “Two Becoming One” and Lesson 1 - “Born Again to be Transformed”.
2. Each lesson, 2 through 13, is designed to be completed independently, but conclude with **Conversation For Oneness** about your personal thoughts and responses.
3. So, decide together on the best day and time of the week for your follow-up conversations. For the best result, make this investment in your marriage a top priority for the next 13 weeks—you won’t regret it!

About the Scriptures

1. While several New Testament scriptures speak directly to the marriage relationship, all scriptures on human relationship have applications to marriage as well, if not more so.
2. This Bible study focuses on the Fruit of the Spirit as the qualities of Christ-like character in the marriage relationship.
3. In Jewish thought, lists are incomplete. So along with the list of the Fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5, humility, holiness and wisdom are added as you will see.
4. Each fruit of the Spirit contributes and supports all the others. While you consider each one independently, in real life they function inter-dependently.
5. If you both feel the need for a “third voice” to help you untangle a tangled relationship, be sure you both turn to a certified Christian counselor who understands the Bible and God’s intention for marriage.

About the Author

Sharon and I married in 1965 and entered pastoral ministry in 1967. We are graduates of Nyack College and I also graduated from Denver Seminary. We served Christ in Alliance Churches (C&MA) in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York and New Jersey. As a pastor I conducted many pre-marital and marriage counseling sessions. I cared for many couples in their spiritual growth. These lessons also reflect our long and imperfect marriage. In retirement I write Bible studies and articles available at no cost at: www.branchesinthevine.com.

Dedication and Appreciation

Sharon and I dedicate these lessons to our parents, Ivar and Loraine Borg and Paul and Edith Richer who married well and stayed well-married till death parted them. Their Christ-like character provided a great example to us both.

We also thank my brother, Dr. Dennis Borg, for his professional critique of these lessons as a Bible teacher and certified Marriage and Family Counselor. Thanks also to our pastor, Chris Francis, for his input and support during this project.

Now read together the Introduction: “Two Becoming One”

Marry Well and Stay Well-Married

"Till Death Do Us Part"

Introduction

Two Becoming One

God created and ordained marriage to be a sacred covenant between a man and a woman who "leave and cleave" to become one. Following the creation of Eve, God states his intention for marriage in Genesis 2:24-25:

"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."

Jesus restates the Father's intention for oneness in marriage in Matthew 19:4-6:

"Haven't you read," he [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Oneness is described as complementary and exclusive intimacy mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. The depth of oneness was described to me informally by a friend of mine whose wife passed away four weeks earlier. Sadly, he said, "I feel like half of me died". Ideally marital oneness is a binding, inseparable covenant. However, oneness is not fixed but fluid. Oneness can be weakened, threatened and broken or it can grow, be strengthened and secured. Therefore, oneness needs constant attention whether you are newlyweds, young marrieds or older marrieds. Oneness is the recurring theme in each lesson.

The Clash of Two Characters

Hopefully you and your spouse discovered a good baseline of compatibilities in your pre-marital counseling to "marry well". On your wedding day "oneness" sounded blissful but didn't happen instantly when you were pronounced "husband and wife". Why? Following the honeymoon real life took over and the bliss started to dim due to the natural clash of two characters. Two unique people raised in two unique families set out to fashion their own unique marriage. Staying well-married doesn't mean co-existence under the same roof. Staying well-married doesn't mean annoyance free, disagreement free, misunderstanding free, forgetfulness free, forgiveness free or sin free. Jesus said, *"A good man [husband and wife] brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."* (Luke 6:45) Your heart is the seat or place of your character. You may wonder, "Is it possible for my character to change?" Yes! Through God's Spirit your character can be transformed into Christ-likeness. You can become a better you to the glory of God the Father. How does a marriage last and survive a lifetime? It starts with a covenant not a contract. A **contract** is agreements

between two broken people that are easily broken. On the other hand, the **covenant** is promises made to each other before God. God in Christ is the “Wonderful Counselor” (Isaiah 9:6) who empowers the couple to reconcile and restore each other to oneness. This Bible study will show you the way and point you to Christ, your best hope for you and your spouse to blend your characters into a “oneness” that lasts a lifetime.

My Family Story

My father, Ivar Borg, married well and stayed well-married--all three times! Sadly, Dad experienced “till death do us part”. Our family story is a mix of deep sorrows and great joys. My two older brothers and I had the same birth mother (Loraine). But Mom lost her battle with cancer and won her reward of heaven in 1955 at the age of 41. I was 10 years old. We were devastated as were all who knew her. Dad married again to a wonderful single lady named Isabel. She dearly loved my father and us three hungry teenagers. But in 1965, Isabel also lost her short battle with cancer at age 43 and we mourned again. My father’s steadfast faith and Christ-like character held us together in our pursuit of God’s peace and comfort and emotional healing. Later Dad married Helen, a wonderful Christian widow. They too stayed well-married till Dad’s death in 1989. My oldest brother, Jerry, and his wife Jackie have stayed well-married for over 50 years as well as Sharon and I. My brother Dennis and his wife, Joy, were married for 28 years till her death in 1992. He also married again to Charlotte, a wonderful Christian widow. Our eight collective children have also married well and are staying well married. We all have nothing to boast about except Christ! If you and your spouse want to stay well-married and reach a deeper depth of the “oneness” that God intended, these lessons are for you.

Now read together lesson 1, “Born Again to be Transformed”.

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Lesson 1
Born Again to be Transformed
Christ-Like Character

Your best hope for life-lasting love and deep “oneness” (Genesis 2:24) in your marriage is to blend your characters by Christ-likeness. This first lesson is a series of four major Bible readings that describe how this hope can become reality in your life. All the lessons are guides into the Bible—the word of God which is powerful and life changing (Hebrews 4:1-3). Think of the scriptures as God’s voice to you. So “buckle your seatbelts” together in a quiet secluded place for about 60 minutes. Before you begin, pray and ask God to help you stay focused on his voice. Don’t hurry. Take turns reading.

Born Again

As Jesus began his earthly ministry he had a sit-down conversation with a sincere and curious Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. Listen in:

Read John 3:1-21

The Apostle John stated this at the beginning of his gospel:

“Yet to all who did receive him [Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” John 1:12-13

Born again to become a child of God is a breathtaking radical experience! But it doesn’t end there. At the end of his earthly ministry and before his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus has this to say to his followers then and to you both as well:

Read John 14:15-27

It should be noted through the prophet Isaiah that Jesus is given the title of Counselor:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

So, Jesus, the Counselor, sends the Holy Spirit to live within his followers to be their Counselor. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Because you are sons [and daughters], God sent the Spirit of his Son [Jesus Christ] into our hearts” (Galatians 4:6). This is also a radical spiritual reality! For what reason? Read on.

To Be Transformed

While the Apostle Paul was born again as recorded in Acts 9, he discovered it was impossible to live and mature as a child of God by his own strength and determination. He describes his struggle and failure in his letter to the Roman Christ-followers:

Read Romans 7:14 to 8:17

So, the Spirit of God in you is your only hope to overcome and be rescued from the slavery of your old sinful nature. Later in this letter Paul writes:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2

The word “transformed” here is the Greek word, metamorphosis. As a caterpillar forms a cocoon in which it dies to its old nature only to emerge as a butterfly, you too can choose to spiritually die to your old sinful nature and emerge as a better you than you were before—“God’s good and pleasing and perfect will” for you. In other words Paul writes:

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he [Christ] might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” Romans 8:29

These “brothers and sisters” include you and your spouse! The purpose of transformation is the likeness of Jesus Christ in both of you as children of God. So what is Christ like?

The Fruit of the Holy Spirit

Not only is Jesus Christ the sinless model for your character, but the Spirit of Christ within you is your Counselor to make your transformation into Christ-likeness happen. Paul gives greater detail in his letter to the Galatians:

Read Galatians 5:13-26

The fruit of the Holy Spirit are the virtues of Christ’s character imparted to you both. But how? Paul informs the Christians in Ephesus, and you as well, that the Holy Spirit is continually available to you any time in any place. He writes:

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” Ephesians 5:18

The Greek here is “...be being filled...” or “keep on being filled” meaning a constant desire and humble prayer request. While the Spirit-filled life may seem “new” to you, it is the common reality of sincere and humble followers of Christ since his resurrection to this day.

Listen to what God says about himself through his prophet Isaiah:

*“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Isaiah 57:15*

Will you both be that “one”?

Flee and Pursue

As God exposes the condition of your heart and character, you may feel disappointed by the struggles you have, but remember Paul’s confession in Romans 7 and 8. In addition note Paul’s

inspired exhortations to young Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, to “flee and pursue: *“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.” I Timothy 6:11*

and:

“Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” II Timothy 2:22

Simply put, “flee all evil desires by pursuing Christ.” The writer to the Hebrew Christians put it this way:

“...throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith....” Hebrews 12:1-2

When you pursue Christ daily, not just on Sundays, the temptations that easily “entangle” lose their strength and appeal. When you fix the eyes of your heart on Christ, the pleasures of his fellowship weaken the empty pleasures of sin and you’ll grow in your likeness of him by the work of his Spirit within you. Don’t run looking back at your evil temptations—rather look forward in the pursuit of Christ every day. In doing so you will “live” in the Spirit, “walk” in the Spirit and be “led” by the Spirit (Galatians 5)!

Becoming One

Oneness in marriage as God ordained (Genesis 2:24) didn’t happen on your wedding day. Hopefully it began. But life-lasting oneness happens over many shared experiences with many honest and loving conversations. So end this lesson with a face-to-face conversation for oneness in which you open your hearts to each other.

Answer the following questions with your spouse:

1. Based on the scriptures in this lesson, briefly describe your personal journey with Jesus Christ to date.
2. In what ways do you feel your own Christ-like character transformation would strengthen the oneness in your marriage?
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 2

To Be Served or To Serve

Christ-Like Humility

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, humility was not a virtue of character to be admired but rather a weakness to be ridiculed. Like the rest of us, you were born a “cry baby” and convinced then that life was and would continue to be “all about me”. We all suffer from the destructive virtue of our own pride. Since your fallen sinful condition started with the pride of a married couple in a garden long ago (Genesis 1-3), the virtue of Christ-like humility seems to be a good place to begin the transformation of your character to stay well-married for a lifetime.

The sinful nature or “old self” (Colossians 3:9) enjoys and craves honor and respect. In Paul’s letter to Timothy he describes godless people as “...lovers of themselves...boastful, proud, abusive...” (II Timothy 3:2). While these are marriage vow breakers, there are subtle expressions that threaten the “oneness” God intended. While the texts below are written by Paul to churches, how much more important are there applications to the relationship of marriage? Note Paul’s use of “selfish ambition”, meaning my plans, concerns and interests are more important than yours, and “vain conceit”, or any arrogance or superiority. Selfish ambition is a sinful threat to oneness, even its subtle and occasional expressions.

Read – Philippians 2:1-4 and Romans 12:3, 10, 16

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **selfish ambition** to the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

To Serve

Let’s begin with a sober warning of Jesus: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.”* In essence, “If you follow me selfish ambition will not be tolerated”. In the next breath Jesus humbly said, *“I did not come to be served, but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:25-28). In the Kingdom of God there are no kings or queens who return home each day to be served. Rather, every husband and wife returns as servants who serve each other.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to Philippians from a Roman jail wrote: *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 2:5). The text below examines the detail of Christ’s humility known as the “Kenosis” passage. In the Greek Kenosis means “self-emptying”. It seems illogical that the One who created all things (Colossians 1:15-17) could also express such extreme humility, but He did!

The companion text below in Ephesians 5 is likewise profound due to the meaning of “submission” and “submit”. In the Greek these words have nothing to do with “authority over”

or “obedience to”. Rather, they mean a voluntary submission of one’s self or to “defer” or even “give up” your own plans or needs or interests to be freed to serve the plans, needs and interests of your spouse. This submission is a kind of “self-emptying” just like Christ did! You could say that your submission is a Kenosis-like self-emptying. This is the *“imitation of your heavenly Father’s love* (Ephesians 5:1), the grace that is pure, undeserved and sacrificial. Such Christ-like humility (Ephesians 5:2) strengthens your oneness. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit within you.

Read – Philippians 2:5-11 and Ephesians 5:21-33

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **humility** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

The Complementarian Marriage

The only perfect marriage, of the perfect husband and the perfect wife after a perfect garden wedding, didn’t last long when pride entered their hearts. So, every marriage since is the union of two imperfect people—a man and a woman who see and feel and think differently about most everything. God in his wisdom ordained oneness in which each spouse compliments and completes the other. Humble awareness is the key to a complementarian marriage that allows each to use their strengths for the good of the other, and each to accept the other’s weaknesses with protection and care. A **complimentary** relationship completes both of you. You need each other for the best possible outcomes. In other words, you share your victories and defeats. You rejoice together and cry together. With Christ-like humility you serve each other well. This is what it means to have “...*Christ formed in you...*” (Galatians 4:19). Complementarian marriages experience a strength of oneness for a lifetime.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 3

The Heart of Integrity

Christ-Like Holiness

At first glance the fruit of the Spirit of Christ-like holiness is the least desirable. Why is that? Holiness is depicted worldwide throughout time in all the arts as somber, pious religious leaders dressed in robes and odd accessories performing ceremonial rituals. Even most depictions of Jesus are pious and somber. It's easy to conclude that "holy" people don't have fun!

When Jesus saw the pious Jewish Pharisees, he called them out as *"...whited tombs which look beautiful on the outside but are full of death...you appear righteous but on the inside you are wicked"* (Matthew 23:27-28). God said to his servant Samuel, *"Man looks at the appearance, but the Lord looks at the Heart"* (I Samuel 16:7). So, holiness is *a matter of the heart*, never appearance.

The Common Problem of Lust

Jesus said, *"Anyone who looks lustfully at a man or woman has committed adultery in their heart"* [Author's paraphrase of Matthew 5:28]. Be aware that you could live your life as a "whited tomb" unnoticed by your spouse. In the silence of your own dark thoughts, you could be as guilty as those who are caught in their adultery. In the Greek, lust means: **"the longings or cravings for what is forbidden"**. Unfortunately, we live in a culture in which sexual lust is used to sell everything from vacations to cars. The internet also feeds the addictions of lust. Lust is the gateway to every form of sexual immorality. Historians of the Greco-Roman world of the first century confirm that Paul's descriptions of sexual perversions are not exaggerated. Lust will poison your moral purity and threaten oneness with your spouse.

Read – Romans 1:26-32 and Ephesians 5:1-14

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you honestly measure the threat of your **lust** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Invitation to Holiness

Holiness is moral purity and excellence. In Isaiah's vision of heaven, he saw and heard the seraphs calling to each other, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty"* (Isaiah 6:1-3). In Jewish thought this triple expression means the highest and immeasurable greatness of God's moral purity. Early in the life of Israel God calls his people, *"To be holy even as I am holy"* (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2 and 20:7). Peter repeats God's call/invitation in I Peter 1:15. The writer of Hebrews explains, *"...God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness"* (Hebrews 12:10). Since you are children of God, He invites you and your spouse to enter his moral purity. Is this a hollow invite? If God is God, it is true and possible. It is said of Jesus he

“...was tempted in every way like we are yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:14-16. So when you live in the Spirit and are led by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit by frequent fresh fillings of the Spirit, you’ll maintain your moral purity before God and to your spouse. This is what it means to “share in his [God’s] holiness...” (Hebrews 12:10). In fact, your holiness and moral purity will heighten your sexual pleasure and strengthen your oneness.

Read – I Thessalonians 4:1-8 and I Peter 4:1-4

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **holiness/moral purity** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

For Your Eyes and Ears Only!

In addition to the fruit of Holiness by God’s Spirit, note these practices the Apostle John’s letter warns against *“...the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life...”* (I John 2:15). Longing for what is sexually forbidden is aroused by what is seen or heard. Generally speaking, while both genders are vulnerable to both, men are more vulnerable to what they see and women are more vulnerable to what they are told. There are no such things as “innocent” flirtations or touches or inappropriate words with or from the opposite sex. Adultery is a slippery slope that begins in the heart. To resist “the longing for what is forbidden”, yield rather to the longings for what is unforbidden by having eyes and ears only for each other as often as desired (I Corinthians 7:2). Unforbidden sexual intimacy by touches, sights and words strengthen oneness and resists lust. Your holiness is not the absence of sexual pleasure and intimacy. Rather holiness guarantees the greatest pleasure of sexual intimacy. Why? The marriage bed can’t be defiled by shame, or regret, or a guilty conscience (Hebrews 13:4)! Also, each husband and wife must play an intentional role in the other’s moral purity and resistance to lust. This too is part of oneness. Remember also, *“...as one, your bodies are not your own”* (I Corinthians 7:4). See: “Flee and Pursue” – Lesson 1

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 4

The Power to Change the Past

Christ-Like Love

The love of God in Christ is powerful. Imagine, the Creator (Colossians 1:15ff) enters his creation to die an unjust death as the payment for humanity's sin and offers forgiveness to everyone who believes in him. God's love for you and forgiveness of your sin changed your past and future. The greatest test of your Christ-like love to stay well-married is **forgiveness**. Just how important is forgiveness? Jesus answers the question:

"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15).

How sobering is that?! Jesus implied that unforgiveness is an evil to be confessed and repented. In addition to Christ's warning, consider your self-imprisonment of unforgiveness.

The Cruel Master of Unforgiveness

Unforgiveness is evil because it always seeks vengeance. Paul reminds the Romans, *"It is mine to avenge, I will repay says the Lord"* (Romans 12:19). God lays exclusive claim to vengeance for all sin against him and you. However, for you vengeance is a cruel master. It is never satisfied. It looks for bigger and better ways to "get even". Paul warns, *"In your anger do not sin....don't give Satan a foothold"* (Ephesians 4:26-27). Satan wants to separate you from God and your spouse. Furthermore, unforgiveness creates a *"root of bitterness"* (Hebrews 12:14-15) that contaminates every relationship. Finally, unforgiveness steals your identity as a child of God (Ephesians 4:32-5:2). Unforgiveness imitates Satan. Vengeance grieves the Holy Spirit, making your prison dark and lonely (Ephesians 4:30). It's a prison of your own making trapping you in self-loathing.

As a cruel master, vengeance has subtle expressions from silence to neglect to withholding favors, just as sinful as verbal or physical abuse. Remember the words of Jesus, *"If there is hatred in your heart you are guilty of murder"* (Matthew 5:21). And *"...out of an evil heart comes evil things"* (Luke 6:45). Unforgiveness is a great threat to oneness in your marriage.

Read – Romans 12:17-21 and Ephesians 4:21-31

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you honestly measure the threat of your **unforgiveness** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Power of Forgiveness

By God's agape love and forgiveness, you were born again to be His child. Paul described the radical impact of God's love: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has*

gone, the new has come!" (II Corinthians 5:17). Since God's love and forgiveness changed your past, it empowers you to change the past as well. The sin you committed against your spouse, or the sin your spouse committed against you, can be forgiven by Christ-like love. Dr. Lewis Smedes wrote, "To forgive is to set the prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you!" And it's equally true that to ask for forgiveness is to set yourself free from the prison of a guilty conscience.

Staying well-married doesn't mean your marriage is free from sins against each other. The events of sin require reconciliation by both of you. The sinner must ask and the offended must grant, or the fallout of sin never goes away. It remains to corrupt "oneness". But unlike human counselors, the Spirit will empower you to forgive, whether asking or granting.

Therefore, as a forgiven child of God you have no moral right to avenge and punish your spouse for their sin against you. And when you have sinned against your spouse, you have no moral freedom to justify or defend yourself. Only Christ-like love and the humility to forgive or be forgiven changes the past, even the past of a moment ago. In Paul's classic statement on love he throws in a few "not's", one of which fits here: "*Love keeps no record of wrongs*" (I Corinthians 13:5). "Impossible", you say? But this is the power of God's love in you. If no sin is beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness, no sin is beyond your reach when empowered by the virtue of Christ-like love. Such love and forgiveness strengthens your oneness.

Read – Psalm 103:1-21 and Ephesians 4:32-5:2

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **love/forgiveness** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Four Biblical Practices

Prayer Painful memories of sins against you can evoke emotions of anger and vengeance. In those moments go to prayer and reaffirm before God your decision to forgive. Ask God to heal your broken emotions and restore your love. This pleases the Spirit of Christ in you and He will give what you humbly ask for. On the cross Jesus prayed for God's forgiveness of those who sinned against him Luke 23:34).

Urgency "*Don't let the sun go down on your wrath*" and "*Don't give Satan a foothold*" (Ephesians 4:26-27), and don't wait for an apology either before you choose to forgive. In prayer you can make that choice before God and be released from anger and vengeance. But in marriage seeking or granting forgiveness must be accomplished quickly to strengthen oneness.

Humility “I’m sorry” is an apology that works for sinless miscues, but not for sin committed against God and your spouse. Just as you confess and repent of your sin with sorrow before God (II Corinthians 7:8ff), you must also ask for forgiveness from your spouse with humility. How do you do that? The key is “ask” which implies a confession followed by a question as in the following:

“I have sinned against you by _____”.

“Will you please forgive me?”

When you confess and ask in this way, you make yourself humble and vulnerable.

Journey Forgiveness can be a journey. Both the offender and offended can struggle for a long time depending on the offense. The offended struggles with painful memories that can provoke anger, unforgiveness and vengeance. The offender struggles with shame, guilt and self-loathing. Forgiving yourself can also be a journey. In answer to Peter’s question regarding the number of times we should forgive, Jesus said, “70 X 7” (Matthew 18:22). Jesus exaggerated to make the point—“endless”, just like your heavenly Father’s forgiveness of you.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 5
“You Don’t Bring Me Flowers Anymore”
Christ-Like Joy

Happy emotions overwhelm every wedding day. Vows and music raise expectations of unending happiness. But following the honeymoon, newlyweds begin to adjust their characters from individuals to marital oneness. Their emotions in this adjustment range from victory to compromise to concession to defeat. Happiness leaks out leaving some to feel, “You don’t bring me flowers anymore”. Neil Diamond’s song is filled with common laments of a relationship losing its “happily ever after”. In a fallen world, godless couples only have each other to give them happiness. Unfortunately, some Christ followers feel the same. Since you can’t keep yourself happy all the time, what makes you think you can keep your spouse happy? Such expectations are a fool’s errand and a fool’s hope. No matter how wonderful you think your spouse is, or good looking, or loving, or caring, or thoughtful, they are fallen creatures who disappoint and are self-absorbed just like you! Result: your marriage will never have a romantic happy ending to every day.

Furthermore, godless cultures give permission to look for happiness with someone else. It encourages self-absorption. You and your spouse are subjected to a steady diet of corrupting messages about love and happiness. If you believe them you’ll be tempted to think, “I could be happier with someone else.” In fact, happiness is a great threat to oneness in your marriage. Paul’s description of the godlessness of his day fits ours as well.

Read – II Timothy 3:1-5 and Galatians 5:19-25

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **happiness** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Not a Joy of Your Making

Even the most Christ-like spouse who humbly looks after your needs, concerns and plans in self-submission (Lesson 2) cannot compete with Christ-like joy. Neither of you have the natural capacity to touch the depth of the other’s soul. God wants to free you and your spouse from looking for happiness in all the wrong things, wrong places and wrong people. He wants to give you both what you can’t find in yourself or in each other. First of all, by the Spirit of God you were born again to become children of God. Since “...you believe in him [Christ] and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy...” (I Peter 1:8-9), your shared joy of salvation (Psalm 51:12) strengthens oneness in your marriage as you both enjoy Divine forgiveness and the hope of eternal life! This is not a joy of your own making. Second, the regular joy of God’s forgiveness and “cleansing from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9) clears the conscience and frees you from guilt and shame. Not a joy of your own making. And third, God delights to impart to you both,

by his indwelling Spirit, the fruit of Christ-like joy when you surrender your hearts to him--not a joy of your own making. This joy frees you both from foolish expectations of happiness in each other and the deceptive messages of a godless culture that happiness can be found elsewhere. Furthermore, in times of fear and suffering, as Israel faced in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, Nehemiah exhorted the people, *"The joy of the Lord is your strength"* (Nehemiah 8:10); not a joy of their own making or yours. Also Paul described the presence of God as "...one in whom we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17:27-28). Living with the awareness of God's presence and care gives you and your spouse hope and joy—not of your own making. Such joy strengthens the oneness of your marriage. Paul experienced Christ-like joy in a Roman prison and exhorted Christians in Thessalonica and Philippi to do so as well.

Read – I Thessalonians 1:2-7 and Philippians 4:4, 10-13

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **joy of the Lord** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 6
Facing Your Losses Together
Christ-Like Peace

In a broken world everything gets broken sooner or later to disturb the peace. Some things get fixed easily and quickly restoring your peace and control. When broken things are painful, you can find comfort in your spouse or friends, make adjustments and peace eventually returns. However, extreme losses you and your spouse face together changes everything. Losses like jobs, home, income, health and death of a friend or parents or children suddenly dump you both into a future of sorrow, uncertainty and fear. Life is never the same again.

Fear is a normal emotional response like anger and impatience. But fear is also a temptation to sinful anger and outrage toward God or even your spouse. Sorrow over extreme loss mixed with **fear** can be explosive and threatens oneness in your marriage.

Read – Matthew 6:25-34 and John 14:15-27

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **fears** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Author and theologian Leonard Sweet writes, “God is not in the business of fixing everything that is broken in your life but will meet you in your brokenness and show you Christ.” So what does Christ reveal about himself and your brokenness and fear? First, when Christ said, “*Fear not!*”, he spoke with the authority of the “**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**” (Isaiah 9:6). But another look reveals what Jesus did. In his own darkest hours of deep sorrow and fear both in the garden (Luke 22:39-46) and on the cross (Luke 23:34-50), Jesus prayed. When Jesus prayed, the Father sustained him.

If you find it difficult to identify with Christ, try the Apostle Paul. Sitting in a Roman prison awaiting his own unjust trial, he faced extreme loss with extreme fear. Paul prayed and experienced an extreme peace from God himself. This is a **peace** that strengthens the oneness in your marriage when you pray together.

Read – Philippians 4:4-9 and James 4:7-11

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **peace** would strengthen oneness in your marriage.

1.

2.

While God may “feel” far away, when you “draw near” in prayer you’ll discover he was there all the time. According to Jesus in John 14, the Father is ever present in and with his children. There is no power in prayer, only in the One to whom you pray. Pray to the Father with gratitude to him, not blame. Humbly voice your need and God’s response of an unexplainable peace “**will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**”. Wow! What a wonderful Father! This is God’s promise to you and your spouse. This is your profound advantage over the godless in this world. This peace secures and strengthens the oneness in your marriage. You will stay well-married when you pray together in your losses and suffering and enjoy together the unexplainable peace of God. This will be the story you tell over and over again.

Depression or Anxiety

Suffering losses could put you on the continuum of depression, from mild to severe. The voice of an effective Christian counselor will be extremely helpful to both you and your spouse. Your pastor may recommend a trained counselor. If your spouse is depressed, you also need the counselor to help you help them.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Author’s Note

See my Bible study, “Suffering Well – Understanding God When I Need Him the Most at: www.branchesinthevine.com

Lesson 7
The Barrenness of Busyness
Christ-like Self-Control

Like humility (Lesson 2), self-control was not considered virtuous in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Their moral decadence is described by Paul in Romans 1. However the focus here is not on the many kinds of unrestrained evils that destroy oneness, but your need for self-control and restraint of many good things. Today couples and families are easily driven by excessive activities ending their days in stressful exhaustion. As much as they “get done”, how much is meaningful or memorable or valuable? An old warning seems to fit here: “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life.” A life of missed opportunities to deepen relationships is a life wasted and a marriage weakened.

Marriages become vulnerable to the subtle overload of unrestrained good things. Even followers of Christ are vulnerable to the over-indulgence of good things to the neglect of the more important things. Paul wrote, “God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (I Timothy 6:7). However, we can “enjoy” too much. Unrestrained good things can morph into harmful habits, to obsessions and even to the evil of idolatry—loving something good more than God himself. Unrestraint is a common threat to oneness for staying well-married.

Read – II Peter 2:19 and Titus 2:11-15

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **unrestraint** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Margin

A Christian medical doctor, Richard Swenson, popularized the term “margin” in his book: Margin – Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives. His premise is: *Margin maintains reserves to spend on the people you say you love the most.* Apart from Christ your spouse must be at the top of your list of those “you say you love the most”. The above four categories require reserves or margin dedicated to strengthen oneness in your marriage. If not, both of you will drift apart and become vulnerable to conflict or temptations. Oneness can’t survive if one or both of you “run on empty” for a long time. Furthermore, because you are one in Christ, all life-resources are jointly held to steward or manage together for God’s glory. To steward/manage well requires many conversations that lead to many mutual agreements. Beware also of any sense of entitlement to these reserves. In the four categories below, how would you measure the margin or reserves currently spent on your marriage relationship? Circle one number in each category:

Emotional Energy

No Reserves 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Sufficient Reserves

Physical Energy

No Reserves 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Sufficient Reserves

Financial

No Reserves 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Sufficient Reserves

Time

No Reserves 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Sufficient Reserves

Christ-like Self-Control

Once again Jesus is both your example and provider of self-control by the filling of his Spirit and the fruit of his Spirit. The small window of Christ's life and mission on earth was a brief three years within the borders of Israel. He spent his emotional and physical energies and time traveling and teaching crowds of people and healing individuals. He retreated often to be alone with God the Father for fellowship and restoration of his strength.

However, Christ's primary focus was his disciples whom he would leave behind to lead the mission forward to do what he couldn't do in the flesh—take the gospel of salvation to the nations. While “tempted in every way like us”, his self-control was remarkable. He lived a balanced life to accomplish the most important things to the glory of God and the good of all mankind. You and your spouse get to participate together in those important things in your marriage, your family and Christ's mission. Likewise, you and your spouse will strengthen your oneness when stewarding your resources together. Furthermore, as you serve the mission of Christ together you strengthen your spiritual oneness especially.

Read – Colossians 1:21-23 and Colossians 3:16-17

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **self-control** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 8
The Power to Secure the Future
Christ-Like Faithfulness

Making vows of faithfulness at the wedding altar for an exclusive life-time relationship cannot be compromised. But keeping those vows is the power to secure the future. Breaking the vows creates insecurity and rebuilding trust can be a long journey of forgiveness. But the focus here is faithfulness in truth-telling and honesty in the day-to-day life of your marriage relationship. This kind of faithfulness builds trust and security in the present and for the future. Such faithfulness strengthens oneness and deepens intimacy.

Natural Born Liars

However, dishonesty has a long history traced back to the beginning of time recorded in Genesis 1-3. Adam and Eve were well-married till the serpent (Satan) showed up to tempt them to disobey God who gave them one restriction not to eat the fruit of one tree. God said to them “or you will die”. But Satan said to them, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4). They believed the lie instead of the truth of God and the curse of sin fell on all mankind leaving everyone a “natural born liar”. Therefore, no one teaches an “innocent” child how to lie. Children naturally hide to avoid the consequences of truth. Children lie to gain advantage. Like Adam and Eve, children hide to cover their shame. Training children to be honest truth-tellers is one of the major parental tasks. Your own personal honesty quotient can be traced back to your family of origin. If your parents were “soft” on your truth-telling and your dishonesty, this will surface in your clash of characters and affect how well you stay married. Habits of deception in childhood will persist in adulthood unless transformation by the Spirit of Christ occurs. If you are in denial of a “dishonesty habit”, you just might lie yourself right out of your marriage. Furthermore, there is no such thing as “little white lies”. They all contribute to suspicion and loss of trust when found out. Proverbial liars also break promises with lies when it’s inconvenient to keep them, making the future uncertain. Dishonesty is a great threat to oneness.

Read – John 8:42-47; Matthew 5:37 and Colossians 3:1-11

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **dishonesty** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

A Sacred Trust

When you deceive an acquaintance or friend and get caught, not much is lost. But deceptions of any kind or size in marriage are a great threat to a great sacred trust. When broken, the trust must be restored. Why? Because the deceived spouse will wonder, “What else do they lie about?” Suspicion lingers. Oneness is threatened.

However, truth and truth-telling liberates even when it's painful, but deceit always imprisons the deceiver in fear. In other words, truth keeps the conscience clear but deception turns it dark and anxious. It has been rightly stated that when you tell the truth you never have to remember what you said. Dishonesty is often followed by cover-up lies that increase the darkness, heightens the fear and weakens oneness. Also, the emotional consequences of honesty and truth-telling are easier to face than the consequences of dishonesty when found out. Faithful describes the spouse who is always truthful, trustworthy, reliable, and dependable. Your faithfulness and honesty secures the future of your spouse. Void of suspicion, faithful spouses are marked by honesty, fidelity and loyalty. When each spouse enjoys a clear and healthy conscience, "oneness" is strengthened and pleasurable.

Read – Ephesians 4:17-24 and I Corinthians 13:6-7

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **faithfulness/honesty** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Faithfulness in the Workplace

When you are a faithful truth-teller in the workplace, laboring to the glory of God, you will be reliable and trusted by your employer or overseer. By being so you are not only a good Christian witness to those who employ you, but you also secure the future of your spouse and family. If your employer requires you to lie or cheat, stand your moral ground. If terminated, God will provide a better place for you to labor!

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 9
Money and Shiny Objects
Christ-Like Goodness

The Greek word, agathos, translated goodness means “generosity”. So when you read “God is good” it really means he is outrageously generous toward his children. The Father is open-hearted and open-handed in all he gives to meet your many needs. But the focus of this lesson for your marriage is the common conflict over money and shiny objects. Money is a large Biblical topic because every day it is earned, spent, saved, invested, managed, given and wasted. Money factors into many decisions and choices made in marriage. Money and possessions impact emotions as well. We worry, covet, crave it, and trust it all because we love it. While money sustains life it creates conflicts. A major conflict is compulsive spending and living beyond your means with no financial margin (Lesson 7). The love of money is a serious threat to oneness in marriage.

Read – Matthew 6:21-24 and I Timothy 3:2-4; 6:3-10

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **love of money** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Three Transforming Truths

The godless measure their generosity by change they drop in cups of the homeless, the tips they leave for their server and the dollars they put in a fellow worker’s birthday card. However, the child of God should measure their generosity by their Father’s generosity which is costly. But what stands in the way of your heart transformation into Christ-like generosity that strengthens oneness in marriage?

Consider three spiritually transforming truths every follower of Christ must believe and live out. First, you must choose and continually choose between a love for God or a love for money. Jesus said you can’t love both:

*“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”
(Matthew 6: 21, 24).*

The second transforming truth is this--since God created all things he owns all things, making you and your spouse merely stewards or managers of his wealth day in and day out. The Psalmist simply concluded:

“The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.” (Psalm 89:11)

If you and your spouse love God and fully embrace your role as His stewards, not owners, of all you have, you'll minimize your conflicts over money and shiny objects. But these first two truths are foundational for the third truth.

However, this third transforming truth is the most difficult to experience and live out. It is **"contentment, or the satisfaction with what God provides"**. This contentment liberates you both from a love of money with all of its emotional and spiritual griefs. Additionally, contentment liberates you both from conflicts and minimizes your differences. Furthermore, contentment also liberates you both to enjoy a partnership with Christ in the distribution of the Father's wealth to underwrite his two-fold mission of bringing relief to the physically impoverished and salvation through faith in Christ to the spiritually impoverished. This partnership with Christ strengthens the oneness in your marriage. When you both embrace these three transforming truths, Christ-like goodness or generosity strengthens your oneness.

Read Philippians 4:10-23 and I Timothy 6:3-10

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **goodness/generosity** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

For further study see "The Heart of the Steward" and "The Hand of the Steward" at: www.branchesinthevine.com

Lesson 10
Wild Horses and Forest Fires
Christ-Like Kindness

While the fruit of Christ-like kindness has many loving and thoughtful behaviors, the focus here is the uses of your tongue in conversation with your spouse. Since your speech exposes the condition of your heart and measures the health of your marriage, this lesson and lessons 11 and 12 all focus on your verbal communication with each other. Why? The ancient Jews believed the most common instrument of evil and injury is the tongue as evidenced frequently in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. In addition, the New Testament letters of the Apostles contain at least thirteen Greek words describing the sins of speech that harm, humiliate, oppress, destroy, divide or poison relationships.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus states a severe warning about the source of your words and the certain judgment of God on your words:

“You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:34-37)

Wild Horses and Forest Fires

The Apostle James likens the tongue to a “wild horse” in need of taming and a “forest fire” that needs to be extinguished quickly. Since your marriage is the deepest of all relationships with frequent disagreements, the temptation of anger can quickly lead to the evils of toxic speech. The power of evil words always inflicts emotional injury. Spouses who feel humiliated, or fearful are filled with grudges and eventually give up on their efforts to reconcile. They head to counselor waiting rooms or go straight to a divorce lawyer. In the wake of angry words are the “*roots of bitterness*” (Hebrews 12:14-15) *that poison oneness*. From small “digs” to excessive verbal “abuse”, such anger threatens and diminishes oneness in your marriage.

Read – James 3:1-12 and James 3:15-18 and 4:1-3

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **anger** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Love Is Kind – Not Easily Angered

Just as your angry evil words have the power to tear down and destroy your spouse, kind words have the power to build up and give life to your spouse. Throughout the gospel records

we find Jesus responding with kind words to many seekers, sinners and naysayers. He always spoke the “truth with love” (Ephesians 4:15). Even when the truth was painful his motive was always to draw them to himself and the love of the Father. He spoke with kindness to many who were living a life of wrong choices. It is this virtue of kindness that Christ wants to impart to your character by his indwelling Spirit, who is your Counselor. To remain “one” and well-married for a lifetime requires a “love that is kind and not easily angered” (I Corinthians 13:4, 5) even in the heat of disagreements. However, remember that all Christ-like transformations from the “old self” to the “new self” (Colossians 3:9-10) are not accomplished in you passively but always cooperatively with the work of the Spirit. So what is your role in kind speech that strengthens oneness? Find it in the following scriptures.

Read – Ephesians 4:29 - 5:2 and Colossians 3:1-14

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **kindness** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Your Roles

Assuming you will “lose your cool” and use angry words that injure your spouse, choosing to humbly ask for forgiveness or humbly granting forgiveness when injured, are roles you play in cooperation with the Spirit of Christ within you. If the Spirit can be grieved by your sins of anger (Ephesians 4:30), he can also be pleased with your humility to choose reconciliation. This is your empowerment to change the past, even the past of moments ago. Time does not heal all wounds! The injury caused by angry toxic words can only be healed by sincere and humble forgiveness. Such humility pleases the Spirit and makes Christ-like kindness increase and mature. Forgiveness, both asked and given, tenderizes the heart. Kindness emerges and anger shrinks back from causing pain and injury. See Further Thoughts in Lesson 4.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 11
The Heart of a Shepherd
Christ-Like Gentleness

The picture of a gentle shepherd doesn't play well in a modern fallen world that celebrates verbal toughness and power. Gentleness is often portrayed as timid, weak and passive. However, the meaning of the Greek word "Parus", translated gentle, is actually a combination of gentleness and meekness. **Meekness means, "strength under control"**. In the scriptures they are used together and interchangeably. So, we could say "gentleness is the outward disposition of the inward strength of meekness".

For instance, God appointed Moses leader to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery to enter a promised land. Unfortunately, the character of Moses disqualified him when he impulsively killed an Egyptian and fled for his life to a desert. While there he married and tended his father-in-law's sheep for many years. Moses was transformed. He needed and developed the heart of a shepherd.

The gentle and meek shepherds in Eastern cultures never drive their sheep from behind. To do so scatters the sheep in fear. How did these shepherds lead their sheep? They listened for his voice and he knew each one by name and they followed. Eastern shepherds are anything but weak-willed. God referred to himself as the Shepherd of Israel (Ezekiel 34). And Jesus likewise referred to himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10)—"gentle and meek".

Arrogant Disregard

Just as gentleness and meekness are interchangeable in the scriptures, so the evils of overbearing and selfish ambition go together. When Paul gave instructions to Titus on what to look for in elder-leaders for the church, he told him to avoid those who are "overbearing" (Titus 1:7). Such a person has **"arrogant disregard of the interests of others to please themselves"**. Overbearing is marked by oppressive arguments. No one "wins" a dispute in marriage by overbearing speech. Overbearance always makes you a "loser". Overbearing is sometimes marked by subtle relentless persuasion or manipulation and even stubbornness to "get your own way". Overbearing threatens oneness.

Pray – Read – Galatians 5:19-26 and Philippians 2:1-7

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **overbearingness** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

Love Protects and Is Not Proud or Rude

When Jesus selected his twelve disciples, he knew they would test the virtues of his character and especially his kindness, gentleness and patience. Apart from the sons of Zebedee, whose mother insisted that her boys occupy the best seats, Peter was guilty of selfish

ambition if not overbearing. He was a big “know-it-all” and “be-it-all” till his three-fold humiliation in the upper room (John 13:1-17), in the garden (John 18:1-11), and at the trial of Jesus (John 18:15-27). But at the resurrection breakfast on the shore of Tiberius (John 21:15-23), Peter was forgiven, restored and transformed by the gentle and meek Good Shepherd. In doing so Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd three times: “...feed my lambs...take care of my sheep...feed my sheep...” (John 21:15-17). In this conversation Jesus infers, “Peter if you are going to feed and care for my sheep you must forsake your overbearing speech and disposition and replace it with the gentleness and meekness of a shepherd.” Peter “got it” as evidenced in his apostolic letters:

“I appeal as a fellow elder....Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)

This is the heart and character of a gentle and meek spouse-like shepherd. Such a spouse draws the other to them in love. Each remains approachable to the other without fear or apprehension. They are always welcoming to hear and know the needs, opinions and interests of the other. While they disagree, their mutual primary goal is to always remain as “one” in their outcome. “Love protects and is not proud or rude” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Gentle and meek speech always strengthens oneness in your marriage.

Read – Colossians 3:12-17 and Matthew 11:25-30

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **gentleness** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 12

Two Broken People

Christ-Like Patience

In addition to the 12 disciples, the patience of Jesus is seen toward many individuals. Read any of his conversations like the wealthy young man (Matthew 19:16-30), or the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42) or Martha and Mary (John 11:1-44), as well as Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). Jesus always spoke the truth with loving patience.

Two Broken People

No doubt Adam and Eve never irritated each other followed with criticism and short-tempered words. The perfect husband with the perfect wife enjoyed a perfect marriage with perfect patience. Then they surrendered to temptation, fell into sin and impatience led to criticism.

Before your marriage you both were on your best behavior to impress and please. Love eventually blinded you from each other's brokenness or peculiar traits and habits. Perhaps you thought they were unimportant or even cute, or "I'll fix that after the honeymoon". Under the same roof day after day, the causes of impatience surface quickly. However, "impatience" does not appear on any list of evils in the scriptures. Why? When Paul wrote, "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26), he made it clear that anger is a legitimate emotion. So we could say, "In your impatience do not sin". Impatience, like anger, is both an emotion and a temptation that often leads to critical speech.

Drip – Drip - Drip

The many causes of impatience in marriage are not the focus here but rather impatience expressed in critical words. The Greek translates self-centeredness as "self-seeking". Paul writes, "Love is not self-seeking" (I Corinthians 13:5). The underbelly of self-seeking is found in the same text. "Love is not proud" (I Corinthians 13:4). Paul describes pride in easy-to-understand language in his letter to the Romans. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (Romans 12:3). In our brokenness and pride, we tend to over-estimate our strengths and under-estimate our weakness. In marriage, to "think too highly of ourselves" is to diminish your spouse with critical words. Why? You under-estimate their strengths and over-estimate their weaknesses! When you "think too highly of yourself", impatience quickly turns to criticism. The drip-drip-drip of criticism slowly humiliates and tears down. Criticism threatens and weakens the oneness in your marriage.

Read – II Timothy 3:1-5 and Hebrews 12:14-15

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you honestly measure the threat of your **criticism** on the oneness in your marriage? Circle one number:

Very Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Much

A Sober Judgment

On the other hand, spouses are to “...think of themselves with sober judgment”, as Paul continues in Romans 12:3. “Sober judgment” means an accurate self-awareness or assessment of your own real strengths and real weaknesses—nothing inflated or deflated. And hopefully you’ll see more clearly your spouse’s strengths and weaknesses without criticism. Sober judgment leads to celebrations of each other’s strengths and allowances of each other’s weaknesses. Your marriage is the blending of two unique yet broken people with the potential to grow in Christ-like patience with each other to become better together than apart. Christ-like patience frees you both from a critical spirit to look after each other’s needs and weaknesses. Sober judgment frees you from superiority or inferiority. The Spirit of Christ in you will guide your thinking of one another. Paul goes further to say, “Love is not proud...it always protects...it always perseveres” (I Corinthians 13:4, 7). We could add, “Love is not critical...it does no harm.”

Christ-like patience strengthens your oneness and enriches your marriage. When you read Colossians 3:9-17, do so with you and your spouse in mind. In fact, notice how Paul’s inspired word takes you farther and deeper into the value of patience and selflessness.

Read – Philippians 2:1-4 and Colossians 3:9-17

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **patience** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson 13

The Way We Do Things

Christ-Like Wisdom

In our modern world it's common for spouses to find each other in college, at work or social settings often far from home. They "fall in love" with little awareness of each other's family of origin with its unique culture of values, traditions and expectations. Dr. John Kotter, a research scholar, defines culture as "the way we do things around here". Husbands and wives bring their family culture to their marriage. So marriage is often the clash of these two cultures. Christ-like wisdom is needed by you and your spouse to navigate through them or around them to establish your own culture. This takes us back to God's intention for marriage: *"...a man [and a woman] will leave their father and mother...and the two will become one..."* (Genesis 2:24), meaning **a complimentary and exclusive intimacy mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically, to form a unique and independent family**. In other words, your marriage is a sacred covenant to be carefully guarded.

Leaving and Letting Go

A depth of your oneness can be measured by how well you and your spouse "leave" your father and mother and how well they "let go" of you. Therefore, the threat to your oneness is two-fold. The first is any insistence on your part to make your marriage a continuation of your family of origin, culture of values, traditions and expectations even if it conflicts with your spouse. The second threat is the expectations your father and mother continue to hold over you. The failure to leave or let go or both is a great threat to your oneness because your spouse will see you and your parents as intrusive, competitive and foolish. Why? Your spouse knows intuitively that God's intention for oneness as a sacred covenant to be guarded, not an experiment to join two family cultures.

Read: Matthew 7:24-27 and I Corinthians 2:6-16

Respond – On a scale of 1 to 10, measure how well you have **left your father and mother**.
Circle one number: Not Very Well 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Well

On a scale of 1 to 10, measure how well **your father and mother have "let go" of you**.

Circle one number: Not Very Well 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Well

A Love That Transcends

In spiritually and emotionally healthy families of origin the challenges of "leaving" and "letting go" are not much of a threat to oneness. But other couples need wisdom to navigate and resolve the real clashes or challenges without injuring each other or their parents. You both may feel a tension between "honoring your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12) and following Christ. Christ understood the powerful impact Divine love would have on those who put their

faith in his death and resurrection. His love gave you rebirth, transformation and the certain hope of eternal life. All this changed your loyalties to follow Christ exclusively. Your family members who are not believers in Christ won't understand your devotion to him. They may think your love for them is compromised and hate you for it. Jesus warned this would happen in John 16:18-25 and Matthew 10:32-39. The fact is you'll love your family more! But your love for Christ transcends all other loves. This tension requires a great wisdom to stay well-married. God's wisdom will satisfy you and your spouse and strengthen your oneness even when decisions are not well received by family members.

Read: Matthew 10:32-39 and James 1:2-8

Respond: Briefly describe any tensions you feel or have felt between following Christ and loving family members including your in-laws.

Respond – Describe two ways your further growth in Christ-like **wisdom** would strengthen oneness in your marriage:

- 1.
- 2.

Dysfunctional Oneness

Dysfunctional oneness runs from mild to severe. Severe dysfunction that fails to guard against intrusion is a common theme in movies and situation comedies. Entertaining as it is, in real life you or your spouse will feel humiliated and powerless if parents are allowed to intrude. Overbearing spouses and/or intrusive in-laws wreak havoc on oneness. Mild forms of dysfunction like constant phone calls, unsolicited advice or opinions and criticism lead to conflicts. Now, if you feel "caught" between your spouse and your parents, you best side with your spouse and nicely put an end to it. Agree together on boundaries and compromises. Never forget that your love for Christ and his love for you has no equal, and your oneness must have no rival.

Conversation For Oneness – Have the following conversation with your spouse:

1. Discuss the narrative and scriptures on the threat to oneness and then your response.
2. Then discuss the narrative and scripture on the fruit of the Spirit that strengthens oneness and your response.
3. Conclude together with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Hidden Life-Long Benefits

While these lessons focused on the Fruit of the Spirit in marriage to strengthen the “oneness” God intended for you and your spouse, there are at least seven hidden life-long benefits. You may not be aware of these potential benefits so they’re exposed here in this conclusion.

1. Scripture

As a benefit to this study, you have read and responded to over 50 major teachings of New Testament scripture equal to college credit! This knowledge of God’s inspired Word (Theology) will continue to be valuable in your spiritual maturity.

2. The Holy Spirit

The Filling and Fruit of the Holy Spirit should become your normal experience as you are “led” by him, “walk” with him and “live” in him. God’s Spirit is your Counselor and Guide in all of life.

3. Communication

Hopefully you have had 14 meaningful conversations with your spouse regarding the “oneness” God intended and desires to strengthen. However, these lessons are not over if you continue your conversations on the journey ahead.

4. Parenting

Second to marriage, Christ-like character will make better parents of you both for raising your little lambs through all their stages and changes. Ultimately you must “let go” of them, to find and “leave and be united” to their own spouse. As Christ-like in-laws you’ll become their good friends.

5. Church Family

As you grow in Christ-like character, your maturity and influence will be noticed in your church family. Opportunities for ministry and even leadership will emerge as your spiritual maturity and Spirit-gifting is confirmed.

6. Christ-like Neighbor

You can’t be genuinely Christ-like in character and behave like a Christ-less neighbor. While you can’t select your neighbors, you are obligated and empowered to “love your enemies/neighbors”. You may be the only “little Christ” they meet! I heard a pastor say, “If you are following Christ, you will see people differently”.

7. Christ-like Employee/Employer

By the fruit of the Spirit in the workplace you bring integrity to all you do. In addition, you’ll relate to everyone in Christ-like ways that promote friendship, trust and an overall positive work environment.