

## **The Good Marriage: Commitment, Intimacy, and Interdependence**

I would like to shift gears in this lesson. In our previous lessons we talked about introductory issues, counseling in general, the nature of people, the heart, and things like that. In this lesson I want us to think about what a good marriage is. It seems like we ought to have some sense of what it is supposed to look like if we are going to have some ideas about where we are trying to lead people who come in and are wrestling with issues. In  *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts*, Phillips and Phillips, summarizing from Scripture, came up with three things that they use throughout most of their book in thinking about the nature of marriage. They are commitment, intimacy, and interdependence. I think that is a good summary of the Scriptural concept of what a good marriage is supposed to look like, foundationally.

We talked a little bit in our last lesson about how at the core of the Gospel God created the possibility for us to be faithful in relationship with Him, with each other, and even with ourselves. Faithfulness is a core idea in the Gospel itself, and it is at the core of the good marriage as well. Commitment includes something like stamina or endurance. We are in this forever, for the long haul, no matter what. But it is more than that. Faithfulness is fuller than that. Faithfulness is not just wrestling well with the negative things and the hard things. Faithfulness is also the positive, continued expectation that this is a relationship that is forever. My spouse is the one I chose, period. I am not going to rethink that decision, because that would not be faithful.

There is a very different way of thinking these days in our world. In the introduction to  *Take Back Your Marriage*, William Doherty, who is not an Evangelical but is a wise person who has observed marriages closely for 30 or more years as a therapist and professor, paints the picture of the wedding he saw happening in a mall when he was visiting Santa Fe, New Mexico, I think it was. He reflects on commitment as it is thought about these days and commitment as he was thinking about it when he entered into his marriage. He talks about the difference between the “as long as we shall love” kind of commitment, or the “as long as it works” kind of commitment, versus the idea that this is it. This is my choice. The choice is done. Whatever happens, we are going to make this work. Compare that with the message from our divorce culture. We have arrived at a point in our culture where most people think, “I will stay in my marriage as long as...” and it almost does not matter what you say. You could fill in the blank. That is very different than the idea that I will stay in my marriage, period.

A piece of what Scripture is telling us, and what is implied by the words commitment and faithfulness, is that a good marriage is one that both people, down in the deepest levels of their thinking, believe that they are going to stay in this marriage, period. There are no “buts.” There are no exceptions, no commas, and no “as long as...” My experience tells me that most of the people I know are not thinking like that.

I want to pose a question to you. As part of my work I supervise counseling interns. I will usually have seven or eight people who are doing live counseling with people. They are seeing perhaps between five and eight clients every week. They come in and see me and we talk about them. It is common for me to hear something like this. First, I hear a description of the client. Let us say they are married; they have a certain problem; they have a certain number of kids; they are a certain age; and they are coming in because they want help with this issue. And then at the end of the description they will say, “And they are Christians.” Then, I will hear a similar description of a different client, but at the end I will hear that they are not Christians. And then I cringe. I have been questioning why I am reacting that way. But recently, for reasons I do not know, it crystallized. So my question is, is the Christian granted special abilities?

I think in lots of ways we think we are. Now, our discussion at the moment is about commitment and faithfulness. It could be easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that Christians think about commitment the right way, that they know what the right way is and that is what they really think. What I want to say is that my experience is that often that is not the case. One way to wrestle with that is by asking, what do you think when someone comes to you and says something like, “Did you hear that Bill and Sally are getting a divorce?” What is your next thought? I know what mine is. “What happened?” By asking that question, what do you think I am hoping to hear? I am hoping to hear about a bad enough situation, like infidelity or desertion, very clear Scriptural examples that would make this a biblical divorce. I think that is what a lot of us would be wondering.

Let me stretch this story a little further. About 12 years ago a man came to Saint Louis who did a conference on infidelity that I thought I needed to go to. He had written a book called *Private Lies*. His name is Frank Pittman. I thought I needed to hear Frank Pittman talk about infidelity. So I spent two days listening to this man who is not a believer. I doubt he goes to church at all. He does share in some of his writing and speaking negative experiences in his own upbringing related to church, including the devastation of an uncle who was caught in infidelity with a church organist. That is a piece of his experience with the church that colors his perception. At times he will sound like he is making fun, or at least being critical, of people who are church-oriented. So he is clearly not a believer. But I walked out after two days of listening to this man talk about infidelity, and I was ashamed of myself. I was ashamed of my church, not my local church, but the broader church. This man, for basically practical reasons as he had observed the impact of divorce, was a better champion for maintaining and fighting for marriage than I was, and he was doing a better job than I saw the church doing. That was really the beginning of my realization that when I hear about Bill and Sally getting a divorce, I do the thing where I want to know if it is a biblically legitimate divorce. If it is, I almost give a sigh of relief as though it is not terribly wrong. Yes it is! Commitment and faithfulness is so much at the core of life and of marriage. Marriage is a picture of what God wants our lives to be like. It is only possible because of the Gospel work that God did through Jesus. It goes so much deeper than just what is happening in this relationship and what we are getting out of this relationship. It will be so much more important to us if we really see what God is up to and if we hear what He is saying—if we see what He has had in mind by establishing marriage and saying that it is not good for man to be alone and by creating another like him who is different from him, so that they can be together. While infidelity is an acceptable reason for divorce, it is better if it does not happen.

This experience led me to start thinking about a man named Bob who used to be an elder in a church that I served right after seminary. He is not an elder anymore. He is not anything in leadership anymore because of an affair that he had with his secretary at work. When it came to light, this man repented and did everything he could to preserve, save, and rebuild his marriage. He started by taking his wife with him as he went into work, a business that he owned, and fired his secretary. I do not even know if that is legal. But that was good. Perhaps she could have sued him. She probably would have won. But he knew he needed to take some action, and he did it with his wife. She saw. I met them several years later, and at that point in time, once every year or so, they would run groups for young married couples. In those groups they would tell their story. Their story included what happened in their marriage and where it is now and the fact was that their marriage after the infidelity was much better than it had ever been. The infidelity, like all kinds of crisis and problems, was an opportunity. They used it as such to develop more intimacy with each other, more faithfulness, sharing and teamwork, more commitment, intimacy, and interdependence than they had before. They were able to look and say (I am not quoting them, but it would fit), “This infidelity gave us an opportunity to look at what it was about our marriage that did not prevent Bob’s unfaithfulness.” That is not blaming the marriage. He was responsible for the wrong choices that he made. But there was a context there. When marriage is functioning rightly, infidelity is

really absurd. I am not saying it is impossible, but it is absurd when marriage is functioning rightly because of the levels of commitment, intimacy, and interdependence.

That is a challenging thing to think about, because it is one of those places where we have to hold things in tension. It goes in the same category of God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Do not try to fit those together. You do not have the mind for that. By that I mean that you are not God. But hold both of those as true. In the same way, a couple is committed forever. But at the same time God could say that that covenant is so radically broken that divorce is permissible. We have to hold on to both of those things. My fear, and the point of what I have been trying to say, is that we put more weight on the side of divorce. The heaviest part should be on the commitment that is forever. If you really understand that, you will hear people's comments about the struggles in their marriage differently. Often, behind people's comments is a question. It is a question that is really a dumb question. But it never seems like a dumb question until we really grasp the level of commitment that should be present in marriage. The dumb question is "Did I marry the right person?" That is not a good question. The idea of doing an inventory to see if we match well is the product of a dumb question. The idea behind that is that you have to find the right person. You have to find the person who will be safe. You have to find the person who you can be assured you will stay together with. It is a very common question these days because of the culture of divorce that we live in. It is an understandable question. I am not saying people are stupid when I say it is a dumb question. I do not mean that. It is an understandable question. I have never used those words before, but the reason it came out that way is because it is a question that does not take you anywhere good. Answering that question does not take you anywhere good. In fact, it is part of what contributes to the fear we were talking about in an earlier lesson that is delaying people from moving into marriage. It is what is behind the extreme carefulness and hyper-vigilance that seems to be happening in relationships. There is a type of dating that develops systems to avoid the whole growth process in a relationship. I think that grows out of this question.

Sometimes we use theology to heighten the question, but it is a bad use of theology. We think that since God has the right person for us there is only one out there and we are now on this mysterious mission to find that person. Then we really distort things because we develop a list, sometimes it is even written. We list the 10 characteristics of this person. When someone matches those characteristics then we will know that this is the right one. But that is all based on what I think is a wrong question. If we really understand commitment and faithfulness, we will understand that when we make the decision to marry, it is the right person. That decision has been made. It does not matter if on the inventories you do not match up that well. It does not matter what you learn later about that person. It does not matter if you figure out some other reasons that were always there for why this person was attractive to you, even if those reasons are not so good. That happens to most of us in some way or another. They may not be big things, but they might be. But it does not matter. You made the choice. The choice is done. It is not about marrying the right person.

I think it was Norman Wright who said marriage is about becoming the right person. Part of the commitment is for us to change and grow so that we become more and more the person whom our spouse needs. The focus is on us rather than our spouse and how we are going to change them or how much they need to change for us. That is more of that bad thinking. As opposed to that, we need to recognize that we are not everything that our spouse needs. I am just not. Some of the things my spouse needs from me she deserves. She deserves from me to be working on those things. She deserves for me to love her in a way that is sacrificial. One of the few things that God tells us about what marriage should look like is "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church." That is enough, by the way, for a lifetime of thinking, effort, and growth. Love your wives like Christ loved the church. Wives, love your husbands and respect them.

I am trying to paint a picture of how important this commitment is. Phillips and Phillips are right on at pointing to this as a fundamental aspect of marriage. I need to say it again. It is hard to maintain that thinking, that accurate thinking, all the way deep down through your thinking when you live in a world that does not believe it or live by it. Think of this for a moment. Earlier we were talking about worldview a bit. Doing some reading earlier this year on worldview, the concept of the pre-theoretical came up. I will explain it this way. Pre-theoretical are the things you think before you think. They are the thoughts you use to think. You might call them presuppositions, but it even goes a little deeper than that. They are the things you think before you think. It is the knowledge you possess before you enter into the process of thinking. Commitment is one of those things. So we can say, “I believe that. I have heard good preaching about that.” You could be thinking about it in all kinds of ways. It could have been part of your wedding ceremony, whatever it might be. But my contention is that all these things are what you think. If I ask you what you think about commitment you might say, “Yes, you need to be committed. You are in marriage forever.” But living in the world that we live in, as I listen to people at a pre-theoretical level, what they think before they think is “But, she or he better never...” and you can fill in the blank. Very few of us think otherwise, and I understand why. But I believe that God’s statement on commitment and His attitude about commitment and faithfulness should lead us to go into marriage, thinking that there is nothing the other person could do that would make us want to get out of it. If it turns out that they end up sleeping around with all these other people, I am not leaving. I will fight for this. Not very many of us are thinking that before we think. But I think that is what the Bible is saying.

Let me take up some questions relating to that. In a real situation where someone’s spouse was being promiscuous, how do you really encourage the other spouse to stay in it when it is so dark and hard and painful? That is a great question. I am going to answer by saying something else that may not seem like it is related, but I want to finish something that I started. I asked the question earlier, is the Christian granted special abilities? I think an approach to answering that is, though it is a bit of a fuzzy answer, the Christian is clearly granted a special relationship. Through that special relationship, God grows in us the things that we need for living this life. This is as opposed to interpreting the biblical statement that Christians are new creatures as teaching that there is now resident in us these special abilities that enable us to handle things. Those who are Presbyterian or Reformed might look at the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on this point. The second paragraph in the chapter on sanctification talks about how God works in us, transforming every part of us, but no part completely. (That also contravenes the concept that many people have of flesh and spirit—namely that the flesh is sinful and the spirit is not.) We are being transformed in every part, but in no part completely. That is not a direct quote; it is my paraphrase, but it is accurate. Therefore there is a battle that is being waged between the flesh and the spirit, not meaning particular parts, but descriptive of the parts that are transformed and the parts that are not. Each part is both. There is a mix. Therefore there is a battle that keeps going on. We need this special relationship to fight the battle well.

What does a mature Christian look like? He or she stays in the battle. Maturity is not measured by absence of sin. It is measured by staying in the battle, recognizing that brokenness will show up in all parts of us. So as we were talking about the different aspects of our hearts in an earlier lesson, seeing the Bible’s descriptive word “heart” as encompassing the whole person—at least the whole soul, the whole immaterial aspect of the person—we recognized that the emotions and thoughts and will are all mixed, transformed, and yet not completely. There is a battle. There is a battle that occurs emotionally. There is a battle that occurs in our thoughts. There is a battle that occurs in the will. Even separating them like that is somewhat artificial for the purpose of thinking about it. It is really one thing. We need to be in this special relationship so that we can stay in the battle in the moment. This is as opposed to the idea that we are granted some special abilities. We are transformed. But do not see that transformation as

being granted some special ability so that we can handle what comes. God does grow characteristics in us. There are dual aspects to sanctification. There is definitive and progressive sanctification. But the main thing I want you to see is that it is the special relationship that is so important.

So in answer to the question, a beginning point would be to talk about the relationship that they have with God. Come alongside them and show them that you recognize how hard this is, how tempting it would be to simply get out. There is enough there to walk away from the marriage and feel all right about it, because the Bible says that this is a legitimate exception. But marriage is really valuable, important, and worth protecting. The way God tends to work in our lives is like Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 3. He prays that they will be strengthened in their inner man, so that they will know the love of Christ, the height, depth, length, and breadth of it. Talk about the importance of their relationship with God and the importance of finding Him in the midst of this, not as a substitute, but as the way to find the strength to keep pursuing and keep moving. That is one piece.

There is a tension built into this situation, however. One spouse is actually being promiscuous. Part of the tension is that we have a role in helping the person be realistic. Sometimes a spouse can simply be gone. In essence they have abandoned the relationship. The other spouse may not actually be grieving that. And when we are not grieving things, what happens is that we are hoping for a reality that is an alternate reality that is not really there and is probably not possible. You might say that God can do anything. Yes, He can. Sometimes He will work like that. But you may recognize—and it takes time; you want to be patient and not make this decision after one visit—that this person is hoping for something that there is absolutely no evidence for. The other spouse is gone. They have moved out. They are living with someone else. They are planning on marrying another person. This marriage is only waiting for the divorce to happen. When all of that is happening but the spouse whom you are seeing is still praying for things to be worked out, the time may come when you are not going to be coaching them to hang in there as much as helping them to look at the reality. It is sad, but that does happen. It happens in marriages between Christians, where someone just leaves and is gone. It is a very challenging and hard thing. Somehow you need to coach them to believe that they really need to stay in there, but at the same time hold the tension that sometimes you need to help people recognize the reality of the situation.

Perhaps that leads to a third point. A third point is that the person who is being sinned against so intensely often needs to get better at putting boundaries up. That their spouse can get away with that, in a certain sense, is because they leave themselves too vulnerable. They are not appreciating the situation that they are in. That leads to a situation where the spouse whom has committed adultery can make any little movement toward them and they are ready to welcome them with open arms. That leads them to get used in various ways. And then the other spouse is gone again, because there was not any real change. So help them create better boundaries. Help them to realize what they would actually need to see from a spouse who has left. One way to think about it is by asking the question, "How can trust be restored?" What would they need to see for the trust to be rebuilt? That is going to take some time and specific behaviors. We will talk about that more when we talk about infidelity. Help them put those kinds of boundaries in. Help them be realistic and still maintain hope. That is a long answer to a short question.

Thinking again about the question of whether Christians have special abilities, is it not true that Christians have the opportunity to do things at times that are unique because they are Christians? I think that is right. As I have thought about this question, I do not think there is a yes or no answer. I have been emphasizing the no aspect to it because I think we often think that it is like we all have superpowers. I watched a movie recently called *Fantastic Four*. In the movie, certain people have gone into space with

Dr. Von Doom and experienced a cosmic storm that has changed their DNA in some ways so that they each have a special superpower. Sometimes I think that when my counseling interns tell me about a person they are working with who is not a Christian and another person they are working with who is a Christian, it is almost as though they are thinking that the Christian has a superpower. Even though they are experiencing the same thing the non-Christian is experiencing, it will be automatically different for them. It is like the Christian has a deflector shield up that will filter this stuff. It will not impact them the same. It will be less painful. They will be more able to get above it and think about it.

I am not saying my students are thinking about it like that but that it is an underlying assumption. They know that when you are a Christian you are a new creature. That is true. There is a difference. There is something unique. So my question is a tricky one. There is not really a yes or no answer. You need to think about it. Christians have the opportunity to do the right thing, but we do not do it all the time. That is true, just like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says. There is a battle to be waged. The battle is waged because we have been transformed in every part, but not completely. There is a positive aspect that has been put in us as a part of the transformation, and that is part of the tools for the battle. We may describe it as the fruit of the Spirit. We may describe it in other ways. That is part of God's definitive sanctification. Perhaps I should not have said that. That will be confusing. I do not want to have to say it is this or that. There is transformation that occurs. There is something tricky about it. What I am saying is that we need to be careful about what we are thinking. Do not think too strongly that it will be easier for Christians. Perhaps that is the way to say it. Do not think it will be easier for Christians.

I remember raising this question with another faculty member. One of the distinctive features of Covenant Seminary is that we all get along fairly well and think about things together. That is a little unusual. People who get PhD's tend to be competitive people. So a common feature in academic settings is that people compete. They compete over turf and all kinds of other things. But apart from the occasional Old Testament professor reminding us that the Old Testament is bigger than the New Testament, we do not get very many of those kinds of competitive things. So the faculty is able to e-mail questions to one another. We are able to talk about personal things with each other, like the death of parents and siblings. In that spirit I was talking with a colleague about this idea that many people have that when you become a Christian it is easier. And right away he said, "Since I became a Christian it has been harder." I do not know why that is. I do trust God's Word that says we will not get more than we can handle. His Word does not say that we will never suffer. Peter asks his readers why they are surprised at their suffering. God does not tell us we will not suffer. He says that He will be with us. And, lo and behold, that really is enough. It is worth thinking about whether you believe it is enough or not.

I have been thinking about that for many months. Just last month I was in Ethiopia doing counseling with people in a very different cultural setting and in very challenging situations. I was exposed in this area. Do I really believe God's presence is enough? I do. But it is worth thinking about. Are we thinking that way? I might be overstating my case in an effort to correct certain things. Basically, I want to make sure that we do not think that it is easier for Christians or that Christians have special powers.

Let me take up a question that was asked. In a situation where there has been infidelity, including lots of pain and anger, which is very appropriate, but yet the couple is able to hang in there and the marriage is restored because God was there, does that challenge what I have been saying? I still think that is a case of a special relationship with God. Rather than something that was resident in the person, it was the One who was resident with them who, moment by moment, can strengthen them. That may seem like splitting hairs, but I think it is very important. God is our resource in the moment. God is the one whom we need. He is the One whom we have to seek for the strength that we need. That helps us be more

honest about the fact that we do not have what it takes. We are creatures who need a Creator. We do not have what it takes.

One of the fundamental impacts of sin, Adam's fall worked out in our lives and expressed in our individual ways, is expressed in a statement by the serpent to Eve in Genesis 3:5-6. Eve said that they could not eat the fruit of the tree because they would die. The serpent told them that they would not die but that they would be like God. We understand that as Satan being a liar and deceiver, which he is. But it was more than that. Typical of Satan, there was something true in what he was saying. It is the distortion that he does that makes it so deceiving. It is not complete fabrication. The truth is that, since that moment, we really approach life like we are like God. We think we can handle things. We think we are all right. We think we can figure things out, as though we were the creator of our lives and circumstances, rather than recognizing that we are creatures. So it is not just splitting hairs for me. If we think we possess these abilities, even if they are God-given, I get nervous because I am afraid that we will start operating in a way that assumes we can handle it rather than living moment by moment in dependence on God.

In situations like the one that was just raised, often the testimony is that "God has never been so close to me." Part of the reason for that is that we are more aware because we are more dependent. If you had a crisis type of experience when you first became a Christian, like I did as a young child, you hit that moment where you realized you are a sinner and there is nothing you can do about it. I thought if I tried hard and lived the best that I could that it would be enough, but it is not. There is nothing I can do about it. I need a Savior. I am dependent on that Savior. I did not understand that all as an eight-year-old boy. But I understood that I could not do it. It was real. That is God's pattern of gracious work in our lives. I talk about that more in the chapter called "Grace-Shaped Counseling." That is how God works in all kinds of aspects. We have to stay dependent and recognize that we cannot handle this. God help us. As counselors we should be in that moment regularly so that our prayer for our clients occur at least as much in the session, maybe more in the session, than it does outside the session. Moment by moment we are asking God to help us. Give us wisdom. Help us to see. Help us to say the right words. Help them to hear. We recognize that the ability is not resident in us. That does not mean that we do not work hard to develop our skills and abilities to do the best work that we can. But we are not like God. We are not the ones in charge. So I want to maintain that it is the special relationship that we have. If you want to say that leads to us being able to express special abilities, I am fine with that.

Sometimes we think that what God does is like magic. We think He is a magician, in a certain sense. And then we get terribly disappointed because He does not do it that way, even though we want Him to. Granted, God can do anything He wants. I know people in whom He has worked in miraculous ways. I am not saying that is not true. It is certainly true. In certain parts of the world it is truer. Do not ask me why. God does what He does. But the problem is that we sometimes try to shape God into our image. We want Him to do magic. We want Him to make it easy.

Let me take up another question. How do you keep listening while you are thinking about the direction you need to go in, even as you are asking God's help? That is a great question. One of the difficulties to listening well is thinking about where you are going. The idea of slowing down helps a bit. Part of what I mean by slowing down is staying focused on this piece that they are sharing. That is my first thought. My second thought is to free yourself up from the responsibility to be the one who has to know what the next thing to say is. We do need to lead. But leading does not have to be question by question or statement by statement. It is the general impact. You can even ask them where you should go next. You can find out from them where they are headed as opposed to us trying to figure out where that should be. That is my second thought. My third thought is that this is all related to trust. Part of it is trusting

yourself, but you also need to trust that God is in the process. You need to rest in that so that you are not too anxious about where to go next. If you are fairly relaxed about where to go next, you can probably keep listening.

I do not preach very often, but when I do I am often reminded about how you can do so many things at the same time. You can even be talking and wondering when you last looked at your notes. I have the tendency when I preach to not pay very much attention to my notes. I might be on page three but the notes are still on page one. So while I am talking I am thinking, "I wonder where I am in my notes." It is an amazing testimony to the way God has made us that we can actually do that. You are almost listening to yourself. Or, and this is not a flattering comment, you can be saying something and it just comes together and it feels right and you think to yourself, "That is good." Thankfully you do not automatically say that. Now, hopefully there is a measure of humility with that, but that is the way your mind works. You can end up talking to yourself while you are talking. You can have an inner dialogue with yourself while you are preaching and paying attention to the clock and other things. All that can be going on at the same time. Here is the main point. At the point that you get anxious, it is tougher to listen and to pay attention to what is going on. The more you can relax, the better. And that has to do with trust and the other things we have said.

In our last lesson we talked about the introduction to David Viscott's book, where he starts with the idea that if you lived honestly your life would heal itself. We talked about the concept of emotional debt, which is the idea that as we store the things we feel and do not share them, it turns into toxic nostalgia. Viscott's conclusion about what a mature person looks like is the unqualified statement that a mature person tells people what they feel when they feel it. That is a really good model for the kind of intimacy that I think Scripture is talking about. In marriage, as much as possible, we should be naked without shame. We should be known to each other. We should be completely known, as much as possible. That means knowing the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This connects with the concept of interdependence or teamwork, which we also mentioned in our last lesson. I put these three things together because it represents being a couple. One of the hardest things in the world to do is to become a couple. With some high percentage of the couples who come to see me for counseling—somewhere between 90 percent and 100 percent—sooner or later, usually by the second session, I have the realization that they are not much of a couple. I get a lot of answers that are indicative of that. Perhaps one of the spouses is in counseling and so I ask the other spouse what is happening in that other person's counseling, but they do not know. I am thinking to myself, "What do you mean you do not know?" Then I realize that they are living parallel lives, which is why they do not know. Or—we will talk about this more later—I frequently hear things like what I heard in a recent counseling situation. I was meeting with a couple and something came out toward the end of our session that I had not heard before. The wife would not loan the husband any money. I did not understand at first. Did they have separate financial accounts? Yes. Well, that is a pretty good sign they had not become a couple. It is a very practical thing. I understand that there are ways to make that work. Sometimes it is easier and more peaceful for people. But generally if the money is not "their" money, it is a sign that there is a reduction in the concept of teamwork and interdependence. I am not talking simply about money. We can talk about how you do that. I am not talking about that right now. I am talking about the interdependence and the teamwork. A diagnostic sign to make you perk up and listen is whether the couple is living separately parallel lives in some way. Often when there is "his" money and "her" money, it is a sign.

How would we define what a couple is? A couple is two people who are committed, intimate, and interdependent. Actually, here is a better answer. A couple is like a two-person Trinity. The two become



one flesh. Just like in the Trinity, they still are distinct people, but they are one. What I see a lot of is two people who live together, share things to some extent, have sex together, and do a lot of things that only married people do, but they do not have that Trinity-like relationship between them. I do not know what other word to use. That characteristic is in good relationships. Imagine that someone asked you questions about your spouse. If you are a really strong couple, you should be able to answer most of those pretty accurately. You are not going to know everything, but that is what being a couple is. Most of us realize that if we were in that situation someone could stumble on some questions that we would not be able to answer. I am not saying that is a bad thing, necessarily. There could simply be things that you have not talked about or even thought about. But often it is about things that we ought to know. You would think two people who live together and have a marriage license and are committed would know an awful lot about each other. It is remarkable that people often do not.

It is not that we have to share everything that pops into our head with our spouse. There is a distinction that can be made here. In the book *Close Calls*, Dave Carder talks about sharing about people you are vulnerable with versus something that pops into your head and passes through. Do we really have to share all about the latter? There is a distinction here. It is the same one that was made in the old adage that said you cannot keep the birds of temptation from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building nests in your hair. There is an awful lot of wisdom in that. Things happen. They just do. That is not the point. The point is what you do with them. Dave Carder recognizes that there are people with certain characteristics that are more likely to cause you to reflect and scheme. It is an interesting discussion to have with your spouse, because often those people are interesting to us because of the ways they are different from your spouse. They really are not the people we would want to marry. There is just something different about them that looks appealing. They look like they would fill a hole in our heart, whatever that hole is. I think it is important to have conversations about that.

We are talking about this so that we have a picture of what a good marriage looks like so that we know where to lead people. I think if we are clear on this it will shape the choices that we make about our conceptual framework, which will guide our decision-making. This needs to be part of our conceptual framework. So when we are with a couple who have a lot of toxic issues, we may end up doing things they do not expect, like encouraging them to do very basic things that they can do together safely. Try to grow some positive aspects in their togetherness. The more that can grow, the more it will hopefully choke out the weeds that are operating in their relationship.

Let me deal with another question. Can we be too dependent on our spouse with the result that it will undermine the relationship? I want to go back to the description of a couple being a two-person Trinity. The distinction of the people does not disappear. When we talk about family systems we will talk about a concept called fusion or enmeshment. That is where people are too close. I think enmeshment or fusion, when it happens in families, is as destructive as or more destructive than overt abuse. It is very damaging. One person calls it “undifferentiated ego-mass.” I love that phrase. That is where you can hardly tell one person from the other. It is as if in the relationship there are rules that say that you are not allowed to disagree or be different from each other. So, for example, in a political election you would have to vote the same way. Somehow voting a different way would be an offense to the other person’s identity. Children are not allowed to be who they have been made to be. They have to be the way the parents determine them to be. There is real damage to the sense of self and identity. There are a lot of things being written these days about that kind of effect occurring in our culture. I think it is real. That makes it more likely that we are going to attempt to set that up in our marriage. We are going to try to get our identity secure in the other person as opposed to in God.

Let me read from Ephesians 6, starting in verse 10. The heading that the editors have inserted in the English Standard Version Bible is “The Whole Armor of God.” Paul says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God.” Why? “That you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.” He does not say run toward, run away, or attack. He does not even say “do battle.” He says “stand.” Paul continues, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” and he goes on to talk about what we do wrestle with. He continues in verse 13, “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having put on,” and he talks about the specific pieces of the armor of God. That is an interesting image. It is a picture that he is painting. It is not the picture that I grew up thinking, however. I am thinking of the picture that I saw in Sunday school on the wall. The Christian was standing with his armor. But I thought, “He is not going to stay standing there. The armor is for battle. It is for going out there. It is for attacking and conquering.” I think the image is very intentional and very important. I think it is a wonderful picture of what maturity is. We know who we are, and in all circumstances we stand. Here I am. It is kind of like Luther.

I think that is true of relationships. In this intimacy, interdependence, and commitment we are talking about, there is a sense that we need to bring something to this thing. Part of the commitment is that I keep growing so that I can bring something to it. I am 55 years old. Part of what I have had to wrestle with, especially in the last 10 years or so, is simply growing up. I have had to recognize that I have a lot of that to do yet. But thankfully, as a product of that growing up, I have a little bit more comfort and a little more sense of who I am. I should stand with that, rather than being so afraid, which is my story. I have been so afraid. If I was standing, I was standing with my back to you. I was moving away, not standing. But through God’s work I have been able to grow up a little and be a little more comfortable that I do not have some of the things I once hoped for. I do not have some of the world-class things that I had hoped for. I cannot be that hero. This is it. I need to be comfortable with that to be a real person with my wife and to let her have me. We have been married 33 years. I know that did not happen very much for at least the first two decades. I did not get that it is about God working in you and growing you up so that you can stand. I did not get that it is really all right to have a sense of who you are that is not automatically pride. I did not know that you could do that humbly. You cannot do it on your own humbly. You cannot just build up your esteem. It is not that. It is not even about your abilities as much as it is about who you are and how that works.

Why am I talking about this? Because in marriage we will have a better sense of that two-person Trinity the clearer we are about ourselves and the clearer our spouse is about us. Part of how we get clarity is by reflecting to each other about each other. We do that in positive ways. I do not mean just saying good things, but we do not do destructive things. We do it in growth-producing, yet honest ways so that in the relationship we get a better sense of who we are. We are not trying to pursue what we hope we are. We understand who we are. That is not saying that we cannot grow. We are actually in a better place to grow when we are clear about that. So the two-person Trinity concept—I really need a better word for that, but that is what I have—is what I think is a biblical picture of two people who are distinct but are somehow one at the same time.

The problem we have is that there tends to be not much oneness. That is my biggest critique. That is part of the statement made in *Take Back Your Marriage*. I should ask you to read the chapters on everyday connection three times. If you are like me, it takes about three times through to really absorb it. I say that because I will use that book for the rest of my life. As long as it is in print, I will use that book, because Doherty is the only one who is saying this. He really emphasizes the need for paying attention to everyday connection. He is the only one. That is a slight exaggeration. But Doherty says it more clearly and more specifically. Why is that so important? It has something to do with being independent people

who stay connected. The connection that we maintain in marriage and that we are talking about in these ideal ways happen through moment-by-moment, everyday connection and through consistently paying attention to each other. That is one of the hardest things to do in marriage. It is really hard to do. An awful lot of people go through marriage paying attention once a week or once a month or even much less than that.

I sometimes say to people I am counseling, "I have a sense that you could become more of a couple. You are not connected that well." I will ask them, "Is there something you could do about that?" The most common response is "Yes, we have been talking about how we need a vacation." There is a place for that. Doherty has another chapter about it in his book, and it is a good one. But they are missing the everyday connection. People think about special occasions when they think about connecting, and they miss the connection that needs to happen every day. That may have as much or more to do with the high level of divorce that we are experiencing in our culture as anything. We do not know how to connect on an everyday basis. So when you are teaching or counseling and you have opportunities to minister, if you can help people to connect on an everyday basis, you can impact the world. You can change their lives. If you can do that, and that is what the *Hold Me Tight* book is about, the marriage you will end up with will be exceptional. It will be in the top 2 percent of marriages just through everyday connection.

Most of us do not pay attention to that, however, because we are married. We live together. Why would we have to work at it? Why would we have to work at sharing together? We live together. We have to share. My spouse keeps leaving the cap off the toothpaste, so we have to share, right? But that is not the connection I am talking about. The things that we paid attention to before we were married, we stop paying attention to. We stop asking questions. We lose our curiosity. We assume we know. And in the process we are working against these very things I am saying are foundational. We are working against intimacy and interdependence. We are working on our own. We are not sharing, because we are assuming these things.

When God said it is not good for man to be alone, an implication is that mankind has needs that can only be met through another person. They cannot even be met through God, because that relationship was already there when God said that. They had to be met by a person who was different. The difference of Eve as a female was important. She was different enough that when God cursed Adam and Eve after their sin, the curses were different. There is something to think about there. The curses were different. We see that being played out even today. Seeing our differences and encouraging each other to grow to see our differences leads to greater unity.

Carder's book is partly about figuring out the type of person you are most vulnerable to. That is helpful for us to think about. If we are able to discuss that with our spouse, that is great. But you can do that in a good way or in a bad way, and I do not know if there are enough guidelines there. I love what Carder has done with the book, but I also find parts of it confusing. I attribute it to the fact that he cuts both ways sometimes. He tells us how affairs happen and how you can protect yourself, but he says that almost in the same sentence. I get confused with what he really means at times. There are two ways to think about the person whom we would be at risk with. One way is we would be at risk with that person because we think, "Wow, they have it." That is a problem, and it is really not the point. The other way of thinking about them is that they help us see the ways in which we are broken. It helps me understand better the holes in my own heart, which shape my brokenness. The person who has certain characteristics is particularly attractive to me, not because of what is in them, but because of what it looks like they can do for what is missing in me. So the discussion with your spouse can get to the level where it is about trying to understand your own brokenness. But it is tricky. We are not telling the other spouse that this other person is what they need to become. That is not what we need. What I need is to

heal. So what I am really trying to say is that I recognize that there are some people with certain characteristics who, because of my brokenness and the holes in my own heart, might get a double take from me, not because of how they look physically, but because of who they are as people and the certain characteristics they would bring into a relationship. I may think I am looking because of the way they look physically, but it is not really my eyes that are responding. It is my heart. I am trying to understand my own brokenness better so that my marriage will be safer. I am not giving a critique of my spouse. That would be a problem.

Rooted in this is a basic issue that we wrestle with. It comes back to the nature of marriage. That is, we do not think very deeply about things like why a person catches our eye. We do not think deeply about that. We do not think deeply about why we want to date a person or ask a person to marry us. We think about things that are basically on the surface. So when we hear that someone has had an affair, many of us think in pictures. We get a picture of the other person whom the unfaithful spouse was sleeping with. Are they better looking than the wife or the husband? Most of us would assume that is the case. Is that not why we do a double-take when we look at the two women who Prince Charles was involved with, Diana and Camilla? Do we not think, “What is up with that?” Well, what is up with that? You see, we are thinking on surface levels. There is something deeper there. Yet we do not usually think about that. There is something going on at a deeper heart level. But we think so much on a surface level. Our pre-theoretical thinking leads us to believe that infidelity is about sexual attraction and physical traits. The reality is—and I will say it this way to try to emphasize my point—that infidelity occurs because the other woman has big ears. Usually it occurs because someone comes along who listens well, and it starts to seem like it would be easier to have an intimate relationship with this other person. You are struggling with intimacy with your spouse, and it seems it would be easier with this other one. By the way, it always seems easier with someone you do not live with. Most infidelity occurs because the other person listens well, and a relationship develops.

Before we finish, let me clarify David Viscott’s concept of toxic nostalgia that I mentioned earlier. Toxic nostalgia is the idea that if you feel something in a relationship and you do not share it, you go into emotional debt. And the thing about emotional debt is that the further you get from the experience, the more distorted it becomes. Then there are also other incidents that get added to it so that it becomes this toxic, reactive thing that Viscott calls toxic nostalgia. It is the kind of thing that can be hooked by another situation. So we find ourselves overreacting to the new situation. We wonder where that reaction came from, and we often do not know. Toxic nostalgia is the powerful, negative reactions that are based on old, historical issues.