

**The Good Marriage: Everyday Connection**

I do not know if we have talked sufficiently about commitment, intimacy, and interdependency, but we are going to move on. I want to look at a theory called “The Sound Marital House” by John Gottman. I have not asked you to read any Gottman books for this course, but he has written a bunch of them. They are good. He is very helpful. If there were a race to see who could do the most research on couples, Gottman would be at the front of the pack. For decades he has been doing intense research, including for a time, though I do not know if this is still in operation, something called the “love lab.” The love lab consisted of some apartments in Seattle, Washington, which were connected with the University of Washington. Couples would come and stay in these apartments for a few days, and they would be studied. They would be researched like mice in a lab. They would be wired for physiological responses such as heart rate and perspiration. They would be videotaped from 9 AM to 9 PM. They would have assignments such as to redo the last fight they had. All this was on videotape. Gottman and his staff would rate these videos and learn what they could. So this man has literally looked at thousands and thousands of hours of interaction between couples. Out of this experience has come a lot of writing. What we want to look at comes out of a book called *The Marriage Clinic* by John Gottman, which has a copyright of 1999.

Gottman has a diagram in the book. At the bottom of the diagram it says “cognitive room.” By the way, let us remind ourselves what we are talking about. We are talking about what a good marriage looks like. We used concepts from the Phillips and Phillips book in an earlier lesson, which are biblical concepts, and now we want to look at some specifics that come out of Gottman’s observations. So let us begin by talking about what he refers to as cognitive room or love maps. What Gottman is talking about are the things that people do together to keep learning about each other. When he uses the term love maps he is actually borrowing a concept from people who are studying the brain. The concept is that if you can scan the brain while people are active in a certain activity, you can map what areas of the brain are being used. Gottman is applying that concept to what goes on in your brain in terms of what you know about your spouse. What do those love maps look like? That is something we do fairly well before we get married. We ask lots of questions. We are very curious.

My wife attended a college, which back in those days was a church denominational college. It had a curfew for women, but not for men. I lived off campus at home, so I suppose I had a curfew of sorts as well. My wife and I started dating in her last year at that college. We started dating in March, two months before she graduated. We knew that this might be something good. She was a student teacher at that point in time. She was not taking classes, so she was not around during the day. She was 30 miles away at a school. So we would see each other as many evenings as we could. Of course, she had preparation to do, but we would still try to do that. Sometimes it would not be until later in the evening that we could see each other. So we were regularly missing that curfew. Sometimes we would badly miss the curfew. Actually, you can only do that for a certain time before disciplinary actions will be taken against you. But none of that happened, because the night watchman was a family friend of ours. I had played basketball with his son, and our families had gone to church together. So Henry never said anything. He just opened the door and let us in. The thing I appreciated is that I felt like Henry trusted us, which was legitimate. Now, some of our friends assumed that we were up to something. But the truth is that we were doing things like going down to the local park, sitting on the baseball field bleachers, and talking until one o’clock in the morning. We would look at our watches and say, “Oh my!” We would lose track of time because we were so curious and would be learning about each other. If my wife were here, she would say that one of the reasons why she thought it was a good idea to marry me was because we could talk to one another. We were doing what Gottman calls “cognitive room.” It seemed to come naturally. But it is not so natural after you get married. That is just the way it seems to work.

Next on Gottman's diagram is what he calls "fondness and admiration systems." By that he means an ability to express those good things that you feel for each other. As Gottman looks at good marriages, he sees that still operating.

Next on the diagram is what he labels "turning toward versus turning away." This is one of my favorites. This is also called the emotional bank account, which is the concept that you can make deposits or withdrawals from your spouse's emotional bank account. One of the fascinating things that Gottman has discovered is that there really is a ratio for the number of positive and negative interactions that happen in healthy relationships. It is startling. Gottman has seen this on videotape. If you are below this ratio, your relationship will be in trouble. If you stay below the ratio for very long and do not do something to repair things, the relationship will really be in jeopardy. The ratio is five to one. You need five positive interactions for every negative one. When you get below that ratio, it is almost as though all the interactions feel negative. When you are making too many withdrawals from the emotional bank account, things are more challenging.

Let me move on to the fourth thing on the diagram, and then I will come back to the third. If you are doing all three of these things, learning about each other, expressing fondness and admiration, and paying attention (which is how I summarize turning toward and turning away), it results in "positive sentiment override," which is the fourth point on the diagram. I asked a woman once, who was a part of the best marriage I have ever observed, "What makes your marriage good?" She said, "It probably seems trivial, but it is probably because we are such good friends." If you had to summarize what a good marriage looks like, I would say it is a really good friendship. It has other things going on, obviously, but it is built on sound friendship. This woman said that they were such good friends that even when they were in conflict she still knew they were friends. That is positive sentiment override. In the negative moments, the positive feelings for each other do not go away. They are not so fragile. They are resistant, resilient, and strong. But if you are below the five to one ratio, Gottman says that the positive sentiment override is in jeopardy, if it is operating at all.

Let me talk a little bit more about turning toward versus turning away. I want to define this. It has something to do with what Doherty calls everyday connection. Gottman gives an example of a couple who were in his love lab. The lab is near the bay. The man is looking out the window and sees a sail boat go by. His wife is sitting on the couch reading a magazine. The man says, "That boat looks like the Jones's." The wife briefly looks up and says, "Yes," and turns back toward her magazine. That is turning toward. She paid attention. It was not a lot, but she paid attention. It is not uncommon for one spouse to say something like that and for the other spouse not to even to look up. Perhaps they give a grunt, perhaps they do not. They heard the words, but they do not do anything to let the other person know that they heard the words and are paying attention to them. They are turning away. So turning toward or turning away can be very subtle things. Obviously, they can be very distinct, as well. It could be a very angry response, for example, or a very positive one. It could be big things. But do not think that it needs to be a big thing. Do not miss the subtle things. I think the subtle things are more important, which is why I emphasize Doherty's book. It is the small, everyday things that take us down or not.

In review, Gottman talks about cognitive room, fondness and admiration, turning toward and turning away, and positive sentiment override. On that foundation you can deal with conflict. Good couples do well with conflict based on these things that have been established in their relationship in the ways we have been talking about. Gottman mentions three things about conflict. I will tell you his second one first. Healthy couples do good problem solving with solvable problems. The first point is something that very few people talk about. It is the fact that there are some problems that are perpetual. You are not

going to solve these problems. They are not going to go away. They are always going to be there. We do not think about that, but it is part of marriage. It is going to be like that. Gottman is concerned that the couple stays in dialogue about it. Part of intimacy and sharing is dialogue about perpetual problems. The risk is that we stop talking about it and get stuck, which is destructive to the relationship. Part of being stuck is the resentment that goes along with the fact that you cannot believe your spouse is different from you in this area and will not do things your way. That resentment can be without words and almost unrecognized, but it is still eating away at the foundations of the relationship. When we lose that dialogue about the perpetual problems, it can diminish fondness and admiration, learning about each other, paying attention, and that positive sentiment override. It can also diminish problem solving about solvable problems. It can be deadly.

Examples of perpetual problems could be differences in temperament. I mentioned in a previous lesson the differences in temperament between my wife and me. An illustration of this is how we deal with directions. I give a big picture without much detail. It is accurate, but there will only be a couple of signposts. My wife will give you much better directions. The difference is because of our difference in temperament, the way that we are wired as people. That is not going away. It does get modified. That is part of the strength of marriage. These things get modified. We help each other grow and change a little bit, but it is not going away. That is just the way it is.

I am a fairly spontaneous person. That is not going to go away. My wife can be, too. Another way that perpetual problems develop can actually be caused by the way that we are the same. We can both be fairly spontaneous, but sometimes she needs more planning than I am likely to give. That is something that is probably not going away. That is something we will wrestle with, in one way or another, for the rest of our lives.

In every marriage that I know, there is a difference in the level of sexual desire. It is not simply that the man is interested more often than the woman. I have seen it the other way. As nearly as I can tell, the level of desire is always different. The only couple I have worked with who thought it was the same was actually in pre-marital counseling, and they were not sexually active. I have never gone back and asked them if they were right. This is going to be a perpetual difference for most couples, and if they are not in dialogue about it, they are going to be in trouble. Gottman is right about this.

Part of the reason I use Gottman is because I do not think anyone else talks about that fact. In the good marriage there are going to be things that you disagree about and even battle over for the rest of your lives. That is just the way that it is. Sometimes those couples are going to come to you who are going to think that they want you to help them fix this. But there will be no fixing it. It will be one of these perpetual things. What the couple needs to do is to get good at talking about it, not to solve it, but to know each other and to share with one another. Perhaps in that process each spouse will be thinking about how they can each do something different for the sake of their spouse.

Another point Gottman talks about is the importance of making dreams and aspirations come true, thereby avoiding marital gridlock. A couple needs to think together and plan and pursue together what they want this to look like. I will talk about this again when we talk about pre-marital counseling. (I talk about pre-marital counseling last, though it seems counterintuitive. It works best for me because that way we can talk about all the issues before we talk about pre-marital counseling. We will talk in depth about the issues and then focus on the process of pre-marital counseling.) One of the things we will talk about in pre-marital counseling is the importance of helping people develop a mission statement for their marriage.

In Steven Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the habits he describes is starting with the end in view. If you have read the book, it is in the chapter where he talks about going to a funeral and seeing all these people you know. As you are moving down the aisle, you see people you know sitting in the front row, and you realize that this is your funeral. You see three of your closest friends who are going to stand up and talk about you. Covey asks this question, "What do you want them to say?" That is a really good illustration. I read that book a long time ago, and I still remember it. That is what it means to start with the end in view.

Can you do that with marriage? Imagine that you are in your 80s and sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of a home. As you are sitting there, the kids come to visit. What do you want them to say? As I have thought about that over the years, I realized that I had an image in my mind of what I wanted our marriage to look like when we are much older. The image was based on real people. I do not know if this event actually happened or if I pieced it together from my interactions with this particular couple. My father was a minister in another denomination. He died when I was five, but we stayed in that church until I was eight years old. I observed an elderly couple during that time. I think their name was Olson. I have an image of these two people walking down the hallway in church holding hands and smiling. There are all kinds of things wrapped up in that regarding the way they looked at each other and cared for each other, their togetherness, affection, connection, and lots of other things. Even though they walked like elderly people, it was as though it was stronger and richer than it had ever been. I have that image because that was modeled for me. I think about the little interactions I had as a kid growing up in that church, simply seeing people come and go, and they impacted me and actually shaped the dreams I had for my marriage. I want our kids to think about something like that for us. I want them to think that we loved each other so much. So what are your dreams? For those who are married, have you ever talked about it? Most of us do not. Gottman is saying that in good marriages that happens. Perhaps I should not say that most of us do not talk about it. But most of us are not that intentional. I think it happens. It may not happen too regularly, but I think it happens in good relationships and good marriages.

In some ways this is parallel to the way that parents attempt to instill habits in their children. It is important to pay attention to habits that are developing in your children. In the same way, we are talking about developing habits in your marriage. This ties back to the everyday connection we talked about earlier and how easy it is to not have those habits that are about everyday connection. What is a habit? One of the best ways to define it is that it is something that you do without thinking. Habits are things that you do regularly enough that there are things that just trigger them. You just do it. You do not think about doing it.

I have a habit, which was ingrained in me as a 10- or 11-year-old child. I mentioned that I grew up in Massachusetts. I grew up in Quincy, Massachusetts, which was just south of Boston. In those days you would have to catch a bus to the end of the subway line to catch the subway. Today the subway has been extended, but in those days you had to catch a bus. In those days, when my friends and I would have a couple of dollars for a round trip on the bus and subway, a dollar for bleacher seats at Fenway Park, and perhaps a couple more dollars to buy peanuts from a vendor outside the park, we would ride the bus and subway and go to the game. After the game, there would be several thousand people leaving, many of whom rode the subway to get there. The entrance to the subway, at least in Boston, is a hole in the sidewalk. There is a hole in the sidewalk with steps, and there is a cover over it so the rain does not go down the steps. Well, after the game all of these people would funnel into the entrance to the subway. I can remember a friend of mine, Steve Murray, saying, "I picked my feet up and the crowd carried me along." But the thing that we knew was that there were pickpockets in the crowd. So I developed a habit. If someone bumped into me, my hand went on my wallet. Now, I do not do that every time when I get

bumped today, but I used to. It is still enough of a habit that I could be walking across campus, and if the president of the seminary bumped in to me, my hand would go on my wallet. Do I think the president of the seminary is trying to pick my pocket? No. But that is the point. That is the way habits work.

Some of us, when we see certain behavior in other people, say things like, "I do not know why he does that. What is he thinking?" It is a habit. That does not relieve him from responsibility. We are responsible for the impact that we have, whether we intend it or not. So habit is the right word. We are trying to develop good habits. To start to develop good habits you have to think about them. Then you have to do it enough to get to the point where you do not have to think about it, but you simply do it. You set up good habits by having good intentions, having good thoughts, and putting good practices into play. All of these things can become habit. You just have to work at it, think about it, and plan and do it enough to where it becomes second nature.

Also, to have a good marriage you have to create shared meaning. I am referring to the importance of rituals of connection, roles, goals, and symbols. What do you do on an anniversary? What do you do on birthdays? What do you do for special events? That is important to think about in marriage, because your family did one thing and your spouse's family did another thing, and the two of you need to come up with your thing. My personal opinion is that the more you do the better. Some people are at a deficit when they get married. If you were in a family that did not do much for birthdays, Christmas, and other events such as achievements by children, but your spouse's family did, you do not realize how much negative impact you are having because you are not paying attention to things that your spouse is used to having a lot of attention paid to. I feel a bit sorry for the men who marry our daughters, because we celebrate birthdays for weeks. Birthdays are an excuse for us to celebrate for weeks. We go out to dinner. We go shopping. Sometimes we will buy something three weeks early. Then we forget and buy more later. So how is my poor son-in-law going to look like he is paying enough attention? If he says happy birthday and gives a card, there might be some tension. I do not know if that will happen, but it could.

Gottman has another point that he calls the five magic hours a week. In a survey he did, he found that over 900 couples who were doing well recognized these things. We might say that this is how the habits were worked out in their lives. They pay attention to these things. It takes this much time. It adds up to five hours a week. These are the things. First, paying attention to partings (meaning how you part one another, say in the morning). Gottman says not to part in the morning without knowing one interesting thing that will happen in your spouse's day. That takes a minute a piece. That may seem dumb. You might not think it could mean much. But what if you do not do that? Let me paint a picture. As Christians, imagine that every day we shared with our spouse, possibly taking even less than a minute, one thing we hope they would pray for us about that day. I know my schedule. I know the classes I will be teaching. I know the couples I will be meeting with. I know which ones are new and I have not met before. There is always a challenge to that. I know the ones that I have been having a hard time helping, or the ones who have a very intense relationship, and it is simply hard. So I have lots of options on any given day. Thinking about that helps me to pause and reflect on what I have been worrying about as I get ready for the day, and it helps me to share things with my wife.

The next thing Gottman mentions is the importance of how you greet each other. You realize the impact of sharing a prayer request in the morning when you come home at about six o'clock and the first thing your spouse does is ask you about how that particular item went. Many people leave the house at seven o'clock in the morning and do not get to see their spouse until eleven hours later. In those eleven hours, because of the nature of their jobs, they are not able to talk to each other on the phone. My wife and I are not usually able to do that. It is usually only in emergencies. So for us there has been eleven hours

without contact, but when she asks me how it went, say, with a couple I was seeing, we just became a team. I shared it; she remembered; she prayed; she asked; we are together. Now consider if that does not happen. You may be happy to see each other, but you did not share anything like that. Even if you share how your day went, there has not been any interaction or togetherness about the day. So these first two points connect to one another. Do not part in the morning without knowing one interesting thing that will happen in your spouse's day, and then have a reunion when you come home. Take 10 minutes to talk about your day. Take turns actively listening. As a rule, support and understand before giving advice. Men need to hear that more than women usually. But women, please do not think you are off the hook, because you can do that as well.

Next is admiration and appreciation. Take five minutes every day to communicate affection and appreciation. I love Gottman's list of things here. Kiss! That is good. Hold. Grab. Touch each other. Play is good. Make sure to kiss each other before going to sleep and follow the admonition in Ephesians not to let the sun set on your wrath. I am pretty sure Gottman is Jewish, so I appreciate his New Testament reference here.

So far, Gottman has talked about the everyday activities of how you part, how you come back together, and how you express admiration and affection. This works out to be about 32 minutes a day. That is a lot of time. Why do I say it is a lot of time? I am thinking back to the old James Dobson videotapes from the 1970s or 1980s where he talked about a study that was done on the interaction of fathers with their preschoolers. They wired these men for sound, and they timed the amount of verbal interaction that fathers had with their preschoolers. I forget the exact numbers, but it was something like less than two minutes a day. But for a lot of us, if you think about it, it is not that much different with our spouses. We can go through days and days without really having said too much. We have a lot to do and places to be. Lots of us are like me. I live far from work, so I do not go home for lunch. If my last class is at 3:30 PM and I have to be back at work for an appointment at 7:30 PM, I am not going to go home and come back. With traffic, it is a 45-minute trip. So I stay at work. As a result, I have some 15-hour days, where I leave at 7 AM and come home at 10 PM. Well, my wife and I do not talk much on those days. And a lot of people do that sort of thing. There is not a lot of interaction. We get too caught up in logistics. When Doherty talks about everyday connection, he talks about having a set time that you are getting together to have conversation. He sets the ground rule that you cannot talk about logistics. Your conversation is not about picking the children up from soccer practice or violin lessons. That will consume your relationship. You may need a separate meeting for that. I understand that. It can get crazy. But you need to put a wall around your relationship so that there is time for your relationship to happen that is apart from logistics. There needs to be conversation that is about the two of you.

Gottman also talks about taking at least two hours for a marital date. I wish he did not use the word date. That puts images in our minds of movies and dinner and things like that. The important part is that you have a conversation alone. The conversation needs to be free from distraction. Cell phones need to be off. During the conversations you can do a number of things, such as updating your love maps. Ask questions. "What is going on? What have we not talked about?" Turn toward one another. Pay attention. Discuss issues of conflict. Repair failed bids. In this last point, Gottman is talking about how couples make bids with each other. A bid is a statement or question where one spouse is trying to get a response out of the other. Sometimes they fail. Somebody missed it. They did not know that that is what was being asked. They simply missed that. They did not interpret the code. So the couple needs to take time to say, "Last night, when I said such and such, did you realize that I was really asking for this? I would like to talk about that." Redo those conversations. Sometimes it is just a matter of asking one another how the other is doing. Some think of questions to ask that might seem mundane, such as, "Are you thinking of changing the bedroom these days?" That may seem like logistics, but it is not really, because

it is asking about what the other person is thinking. Or ask, “How are you thinking about your work these days?”

John Gottman has a little book that he wrote about the time that he wrote *The Marriage Clinic* (which is almost the size of a telephone book. It is huge and loaded with information). He wrote a little book for couples called *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. It is loaded with exercises. My wife and I did a marriage retreat about eight years ago, and we used some of the exercises out of that book. Some of them have questions about which you will think, “Of course, I know that.” I had that sort of attitude when I first did them. I was actually leading the retreat, so it was not the best attitude to have. There was a question that I thought I knew the answer to. However, my wife answered the question in a way that I did not expect. She reminded me of something that I had forgotten, which had hurt her terribly. I had simply forgotten it. I can forget things that do not get reviewed. And that little question, which I was a bit annoyed with, exposed the fact that I had not been paying much attention to her. Perhaps I did not pay enough attention at the time this happened. I did not get how much my wife had been wounded in that particular situation. It never crossed my mind that this might still be affecting her. I assumed she had gotten over that, but I was wrong. So I did not really know my wife’s heart. I did not really know what was going on.

All that is to say that you might not have to ask complicated questions. You might be able to use some exercises like this occasionally. Try different things and experiment. Trade off responsibilities for bringing things to talk about. Whatever it might be, do something on a regular basis to make sure you do it. As a counselor, encourage couples on a regular basis to make sure that they are learning about each other, expressing admiration and affection for each other. Encourage them to keep that process going. If you do not set a couple of hours like that in your schedule where you have that kind of contact, I will be surprised if it happens. It is too hard. There is too much to do. Our lives are too busy, especially if you have kids. If you have kids, it is like your marriage is doomed unless you pay special attention to get that time. I do not mean you are doomed as though you are going to get a divorce. I mean that it is much harder to get time with each other and to be able to focus on each other. It takes special effort.

I sometimes work with couples where there has been infidelity or some other huge issue that obviously needs to be addressed. But usually, at the same time, we are going to work at two levels. On one level we need to address this stuff. On another level, we need to help the couple put things in place that enable them to rebuild, reestablish, and strengthen the foundations of the relationship. We talk about what the couple does when they come together at reunions and what they do at partings. We talk about whether they have a regular time where they look at each other and talk and learn about each other and explore.

One of the clearest examples of this concept was given to me about 10 years ago when this book was written and I happened to read it. I met with a couple for the first time. They were a young couple. They had been married about 18 months, and they had a child who was 9 months old. She got pregnant on their honeymoon, much to their surprise. They were both graduate students but at two different institutions, and they were trying to figure out how to care for this child. As I learned about them I learned that they were both committed to regular exercise, but they alternated nights going to the gym. So their days were spent apart at different schools, then they would come back together for a meal, and then one night she would go off to the gym, and the next night he would. Then they would put their child to bed and go study.

This couple came in to see me because a crisis had come up. He was not sure he wanted to be married anymore. So I met with them. He looked depressed and was really wrestling with the question of whether they should still be married. He was not sure it was worth it. It was not what he thought it

would be. Well, in God's providence I happened to be reading this book. So I asked a question. Conceptual framework can shape where you go and what you focus on. Part of my conceptual framework led me to ask, "How does connection happen in this relationship?" I was hearing about these two graduate students who were splitting their time exercising, and I was wondering where their together time was. So I asked what was happening when the husband would come home. He described their apartment being in somewhat of a circle. He would come home. His wife would be over in the kitchen preparing dinner. He would go the other way to the bedroom, change clothes, and go to their son's bedroom, who would be playing in his crib. He would pick him up, go back through the apartment to the living room, turn on the TV, and perhaps play with the child on the floor. He would sit there for a while and perhaps watch TV until his wife said it was time to eat. Then they would sit down together and eat and have a conversation. So the first words they said to each other were, "It is time to eat." I asked how long it took for those words to be spoken. Twenty minutes, they told me.

Do you get the picture? Eighteen months ago these people had said to one another that they were going to love each other for all their lives. They each said that the other person was wonderful, the best person of all creation, and they were excited to marry each other. But now, after being apart for eight or 10 hours, when they are in the same space they do not even talk to each other. And they do not even realize it. That is the thing. They do not even realize it. It has not even crossed their mind. So we talked about that, and in that room they made a commitment to do something about it.

They came back two weeks later, and I could tell that something was different. I think that is the only time it has happened quite so drastically. They were different. They had started paying attention to each other. And their love for each other was reborn in that. They were different. Now, the husband was still wrestling with some things. They were in quite a mess. They did not need a child so early. They had not gotten to know each other, and they were both in graduate school. In addition, he was wrestling with what he wanted to do with his life. So they had a lot to work on. Life was feeling hard for him. But we tried to put them in a position where he could wrestle with the feeling of life being too hard with her by his side. Together they could wrestle with it, because they paid attention to how they reunited. They focused on that one thing as a beginning. So rather than going to the bedroom, he went to the kitchen first. He put his arms around her, looked her in the eyes, and said hi. It only took about two minutes, but it changed their lives. It is unbelievable, is it not? Actually, it is not. They started acting like they really did care for each other in small ways that they had fallen out of. In falling out of those ways they stopped feeling like they cared for each other in an active way.

So from Phillips and Phillips we learned about commitment, intimacy, and interdependency. Now Gottman has given us an awareness of what a sound marital house looks like by focusing on the concept of the magic five hours. The way we relate to each other in everyday things has an awful lot to do with commitment, intimacy, and interdependence, especially intimacy and interdependence. One thing that Phillips and Phillips do not say is that—though they do talk about growth in commitment, which leads to greater intimacy and greater interdependence, it works the other way, too—the commitment grows as we grow in intimacy and interdependence. It works both ways. Perhaps it is a circle. That may be a better way of thinking about it.

Those things together are a fairly good picture of what a good marriage looks like. If you want to measure someone's marriage, ask them about the everyday stuff. When they come in and talk to you about the big problems that they have, do not forget to ask them about the everyday stuff. So often the context for the big problems was created in how they are doing the everyday stuff, the habits. To help them create a context that is going to be supportive for dealing with the big issues, work on the everyday things. We need to work at both levels.



With that in mind, we can talk about the biblical foundation of marriage and family. In a lot of ways we have already talked about this, but I will try to do this in a fairly orderly way. What is marriage? Think about that for a moment. I have asked that question in class discussions and can fill up a blackboard with ideas about what marriage is. They are always good. There is a lot that could be said. But my answer tries to distill it down into some crucial things, big words that encompass a lot of things. So I end up saying that, first of all, marriage is a relationship. That is obvious. But when I do class discussions, it usually takes a long time for that to be mentioned. Perhaps it is because it is so obvious. But perhaps that also explains why it is easy to forget. Basically, marriage is a relationship. That is part of the reason why in Genesis 2:18 God says that it is not good for man to be alone. It is so important to remind us that we need relationship. Marriage is a relationship, and it is something we need. It is not just a fringe benefit that is a nice option, like some extra retirement plan. It is not that. It is something that we are desperately in need of and something that we are made for. In creating us, God made us relational beings. That is a piece of who we are. Marriage is a big piece of fitting who we are with how God made us to be.

This relationship has a unique purpose with a unique foundation. It has a unique goal and is a uniquely intense reality. That is my outline. So, first of all, it is a relationship. The relationship is to be firmly rooted in God. It will be as solid as that in which it is rooted. We have said some things like this already. One of the questions we dealt with in an earlier lesson is whether our commitment to God can strengthen our commitment to our spouse. Absolutely. There is an important implication in that statement, though, that I want to make sure we see. It is not that that commitment to God substitutes for our commitment to each other.

I remember a paper that someone wrote for me years ago. It was by a woman who was in her late 30s or early 40s and had never been married. She was wrestling with that. She had done some good wrestling with that and grieving it, but she was still wrestling with it. In her paper she made a statement that was very honest and vulnerable. She said at one point, "But Jesus is my husband." Now, there is a sense in which I understand that, and it is appropriate. Her relationship with God is sufficient for all kinds of things. But I wrote some comments in the margin having to do with the idea that God does not want to be a substitute. There is a hard truth in saying that. To not have a marriage relationship when we are made for intense relationship is hard. I am not saying you cannot be single appropriately and be fulfilled. You can be. But marriage is the normal picture of the intense kind of relationship that we are made for. When that does not happen, I do not believe God is saying, "That is all right. I will be the substitute instead." I think what he is saying is, "I will support you. I will be present with you in suffering." He is not saying, "I will be your substitute and take the suffering away," which is really our desire.

Why am I saying that? Being rooted in God supports the marriage relationship. God does a sanctifying work in each of us as we are in our individual battles, struggling with the parts of us that are still bent toward our own selfish desires. We need to stay rooted in God while we are in the battle so that, while we are trying to live in a way that is not solely for ourselves, we can move into the marriage relationship, which provides so many things for us. But remember that you are moving into the relationship in a way that is for the other person. Bryan and Kathy Chapell have a book called *Each for the Other*. The title alone is enough to justify it as being a text for this course. That is a perfect description of what I am talking about. But you can only do that if you are well rooted in God. He has to be active in us for that to happen.

This is regulated by Scripture. There are things the Bible tells us that are negative; do not do this or that. God recognizes that the negative has more impact on the relationship than the positive. What am I saying? God tells us not to do these negative things. Gottman's research recognizes that you need five

good interactions to overcome the weight of one bad interaction. Negative interactions have great impact. So we need to be committed over our lifetime to changing, because we are going to do things that have negative impact. We need to take care of ourselves and focus on the change that is needed for ourselves in the process. Marriage is used by God in our sanctification. The best goal in a Christian marriage—any marriage, really, but it seems that Christians have the best chance of pulling this off because of their relationship with God—is to be focused, not on what our spouse should be doing for us or on what they are doing wrong, but on what we need to be doing for them. Focus on what you are doing wrong so that with God’s help you can change. Be less focused on their change and much more focused on your change and on the nature of the relationship.

Not many years ago I realized that many people who were coming to me for counseling were doing the same thing. They wanted me to join them in what they were doing. At a deep, pre-theoretical level they thought their marriage would be perfect if their husband or wife would just change. They even knew in which direction they should change. They should become like them. That is sad, but it is so real. You can get so focused on what you want and what you think you need that, when your spouse will not come through for you and see life the way you do, you think something is wrong with them. Obviously, they need to change their vision of what they are supposed to be doing. They should become just like me, and then we will be in great shape.

It is hard not to do that. I do not think you can work against that in your own strength. It really takes God’s work, not just to expose it, but once it is exposed, to help you work against that. When it creeps up, you need to become more desperate and pray, “God, help me to love my wife like Christ loved the church.” Now, you understand that the person who is telling you this only came to the realization himself a few years ago. I had been teaching marriage and family counseling for quite a while and doing marriage counseling for quite a while, but it had not sunk in. I was living life in a way that was contrary to what I knew. I was still teaching what was right, but it had not sunk deep down yet. I needed God to do that work in me in a bigger way.

The purpose of marriage is to enable spouses to reflect God’s image more fully. Marriage is a relationship with a unique purpose, to reflect together the image of God in a unique way. We are created in God’s image, male and female. Those who are single should not think this is the only way. God has a good plan for all of us, and there are some who will be single their whole lives. I do not think it is as many as we sometimes think. I think God’s intention for the most part is marriage. I think we run away from that too much. But God can do anything, and He does various things in people’s lives. We have to leave room for His providence to work in the way He sees fit.

A couple reflects God’s image by exercising dominion in creation. God told us to rule, to take dominion together. We were to work as vice-regents together and rule over creation. Dominion plays out in all kinds of ways. It was easier 150 years ago before the Industrial Revolution, or even 125 years ago in the mid to late 1800s, where much more of the economy was based on the family farm and the family business. Men and women worked together much more often. There was an advantage to that. I remember the first time I said that when I taught this class. There was a husband and a wife in the class and she said, and he agreed, “We would kill each other.” Well, I am not saying that it was always peaceful back then. I am sure there were times when the husband went out and plowed the field again. It did not need plowing. He simply had to get out of the house and work off his frustration. I am sure those things happened. I am sure the wife realized why he was plowing the field again, and they had to work through some issues. I am sure that happened. But at the same time, for those who are married and have had opportunities to do things with their spouse, even though there can be conflict—you can have some of the most intense conflict as you rub each other the wrong way in the midst of work—when it is all

over you think, “That was good, was is not?” You have a sense that you did something together. You both brought something different to it, but you did it together. That is as opposed to living lives that are structured as his life and her life. That is much more challenging. There is greater opportunity when you work together as a couple, because you have a lot more contact and a lot more stuff together. Yes, there is more to work through and there are more opportunities for conflict. But who said conflict was a disqualifier to having a good marriage? We said already that if there is not conflict in your marriage then someone died, or something else has happened. Conflict is not an automatic bad sign. Destructive conflict that does not lead to any sort of resolution or growth together is a problem. But rubbing each other the wrong way, working through it, moving forward, apologizing when you need to, and bringing more clarity to who you are and what is going on is great. There is more opportunity for that when you have to work together.

My basic point is that there is also more opportunity to reflect God’s image together. Together you are taking dominion. A husband and wife have a joint sense of accomplishment when they look over the field. He may have done a lot of the work, but she was doing a lot of things that supported him, and on occasion she was out there working in the field herself. Together they were taking dominion. There is satisfaction in that. It is an expression of part of the purpose of marriage.

How do those of us living in the twenty-first century think about how a couple takes dominion? How does a couple together express that covenant-making purpose that God gave to Adam and Eve? We can figure out the part about being fruitful and multiplying. But how do we take dominion together? Do not ignore this. Do not allow the new structures that separate us in work keep us from becoming more of a team. We are talking again about interdependence. In your teaching and counseling, encourage people to think about what that looks like.

One way we reflect God’s image is in bearing children and establishing family. I already talked about this. The mandate to bear children is closely related to the mandate to have dominion. They overlap, at least. Those in our households ought to be trained to follow in this pattern of dominion and increasing in number.

Let us talk about the unique foundation of the marriage relationship. It is a covenant relationship. This is not a theology course, so I will not go into many examples of all the ways that the concept of covenant gets expressed in Scripture. I just want to say two pieces about it. I mentioned one of them in an earlier lesson. The covenant is one of the ways that all of Scripture is organized. There is a core. From the beginning there is God’s covenant-making activity. It is covenant-making activity when God says, “Do not eat the fruit of that tree.” God exercises covenant-making activity with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others. It is not about specific covenants, though there are covenants. But the point is not specific epochs and differences as much as the core concept of how God relates to us. He chooses to relate to us. And in choosing to relate to us He reveals Himself. Part of how He reveals Himself is that He establishes relationships with us that are called covenants.

Covenant-making activity was something that was common in the culture. It was not an unknown kind of activity. It was something that was reflected in the culture itself. There was a covenant nature to the relationship of kings in that era. We see one of the ceremonies that was common between kings showing up in the book of Genesis in chapter 15.

This is off the subject for the moment, but Abram’s questions in chapter 15 are fascinating to me. Abram is declared to be the father of the faith. But then he asks a question. He asks how he can know that that he is going to possess the land. He is told he is going to have as many descendents as the stars. He

responds, in effect, by saying, “Ok, I believe You,” even though he was an old man already. But then he is told he will possess the land, and he says, “How can I believe that?” Abram does not get chastised for that, however; rather, God responds by giving him certain directions. The directions are similar to setting things up in a way that kings would do in their ceremonies of covenant-making activity. They would take animals and divide them in half and create an aisle between the parts of the animals, and each king would pass through. In doing so they were declaring, both symbolically and literally, that if they break this covenant, this lifelong commitment, which is more than a treaty, “May I be like these animals that I am passing between. May I be torn asunder.” Well, God shows up as a vision of a smoking fire pot and He Himself passes through the pieces in Abram’s dream. In other words, God is saying, “I promise to give you the land, and if I do not keep my promise may I be torn asunder.” It is absurd. It is incredible to think about the weight of proclamation and the extensiveness of the commitment that God was making. In other words, there is no way this can be broken. It is impossible. Just as it is impossible to tear God to pieces, to divide Him in half and lay Him on the ground, it is impossible for this promise to be broken.

So when we say that marriage is a covenant relationship, God means it should be like that kind of covenant, that kind of commitment. It is extreme in ways that we often do not recognize. A product of that covenant relationship is that spouses are faithful and safe. I am not sure that being faithful and safe are actually different concepts. They are perhaps two sides of the same coin. Because of the intensity of that commitment, they are faithful and safe.

So marriage has a unique goal. Marriage is to result in being known in relationship. Genesis 2:18 says that it is not good for man to be alone. God goes through this exercise, which we have talked about earlier, of having Adam name the animals so that Adam will recognize the truth that it is not good for man to be alone. Eve is created and presented to Adam so that he can say, “Ok. Now this woman is bone of my bone. I get it. This is what I need. This is someone special.” The summary verses in Genesis 2:24-25 say, “For this reason...” What reason? Well, Genesis 2:18 and following says that it is not good for man to be alone. Adam knows it. God creates Eve, “For this reason man shall leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife.” Cleave, by the way, is covenant-making language. It shows up a few other places in Scripture, describing the way that Israel was supposed to cling to their covenant-making God. What is that saying? This blood relationship between parents and children is not the priority. The person you marry, that relationship, is the priority. Remember that this was written at a time where in most cases a father and son worked together in the family business. It is quite possible that this language of leave and cleave was written in a context where the son was living in one tent with his parents, and once he got married he got a new tent next door. He would still wake up in the morning and do the same work with the same people. But he was supposed to leave and cleave. He did not leave and go off to the next country, usually. That is not what this is saying. This is not so much about geographic location as it is about emotional location. Where is the relational priority? The marriage relationship needs to be the priority.

I asked a question once on a final I gave for marriage and family counseling. At the beginning of the year I gave a list of what I thought were the key Scripture passages that people needed to be familiar with and able to apply. During the test I gave examples and asked the students to identify a Scripture passage from the list that would apply to this situation. I described a situation where a young couple who had been married a couple of years was deciding to buy a car. The husband was thinking one thing, the wife was thinking another thing, and the wife’s father was thinking something else. They came in to counseling and the wife said, “I think he should listen to my father, because he knows more about this than my husband, and he is wiser.” That was the situation. My question was, what Scripture passage applies? Now, on the list was Genesis 2:24, and I was expecting that students would write that down.

But do you know what I got a lot of? The Ten Commandments. Honor your mother and father. That was not even on the list. It is understandable because it is tricky. But the reality is that Genesis 2:24 is saying that once you are married, honoring your parents changes. I am not saying it is time to dishonor them. But that is not your priority relationship. We should certainly respect our parents. But the shape of that changes. That is going to show up especially in decision times. New boundaries come in.

Spouses who have close relationships with their parents can have a very hard time in this regard. It can be hard to leave when the relationships are good. This might surprise you, but one of the worst things that can happen is—I will use the example of a wife, but it could go the other way—for a wife to have a very close relationship with her mom. Imagine that she gets married and some months into the marriage there is some sexual difficulty that occurs in the marriage. So the wife shares the details with her mom. That should not happen. There are new boundaries that need to be in place. The couple's relationship is their relationship. I will say this now and again later. One of the big processes that define and build intimacy is keeping secrets together. It is something we do naturally around the area of sexuality. It is our secret. It builds intimacy, and not just sexual intimacy, either. It is the knowledge and awareness that our relationship is protected, unique, and private. That all gets violated if one spouse who is close to a parent breaks down the secrecy. I am not saying that nothing can be shared. I do not mean that. But we need to be wise. We can be too close, too dependent in the wrong place. I said earlier that enmeshment can be more destructive than almost anything else. One of the ways that can work itself out is that when a person is enmeshed with their parents they will not properly leave. If they do not leave they will not properly cleave. The secret-keeping in the marriage will be broken down because the secrets are being kept outside the marriage. The goal of marriage is to be known in relationship in a way that you are not known in any other relationship, even with your parents.