

## **Conflict and Sexual Issues**

Daniel Wile wrote about a topic he calls “The Crucial Concept of Fallback Measures.” He has a list of four concepts. Concept one, Wile says, is solving the moment. The goal is to solve the moment rather than to solve the problem. By using this concept in his counseling, Wile tries to help couples slow down and focus on what is happening right then, in the moment, to help them do that moment better. I think he has a point. As you help couples solve moments, you build a foundation and move toward solving the problem. If there is a big issue that a couple is having a problem talking about, as they get better at solving the moments, they have better skills to work at solving the problem. Part of the strength of Sue Johnson’s approach, which is very similar in that she helps people solve moments, is that very fact.

Sue Johnson uses a couple different scales to assess how couples are doing. She comes up with a score, similar to an intelligence quotient (IQ) test, where 100 is average. Fifteen is the standard deviation, which means more than half the population will fall between 85 and 115. If you are below 85, you are not doing so well. If you are above 115, you are doing well. Johnson will test people when they first come in. She will test them during the course of therapy. And she will test them when they terminate therapy. She has even done research where she has tested people months after they have finished. Some people will initially score a 75. At the end of the therapy they might get a 92, which is a pretty good increase. Nine months later Johnson will follow up and the couple might get a 112. That happens again and again with couples who see her. They have continued to progress. My assumption is that Johnson helps people develop the skills to solve moments better. Those skills develop to help them solve problems and even prevent the problems, because they are doing better at being honest, talking about issues, not being reactive, and they keep confiding with each other rather than attacking or avoiding. People can change their patterns. So their typical pattern of attack/avoid, attack/attack, avoid/avoid, or whatever it is gets changed. They are able to move into a pattern of confide/confide. This approach of solving the moment can do a lot.

Wile says that you should not try to solve the problem that a couple is arguing over—what you might call the content—but the more immediate problem of their inability to talk about the problem, to turn one another into allies. Partners need to be turned into allies. For example, imagine a situation where a couple is used to going on regular walks together. The wife comes and says, “I have a friend who is going through a tough time. Can we give that up tonight so that I can go and talk with my friend?” The husband says, “Sure, that is fine.” But when it happens he feels like he really missed the walk. He could say to his wife, “I wish I had not so generously offered to give up our walks so you could console your friend about losing her job. I miss the walk more than I thought I would.” Or, rather than confiding that he missed the walk more than he thought, turning his wife into an ally, he could turn her into an enemy by taking a piece of the truth and turning it into something that is wrong with her. “Do you always have to be everyone’s nurse?” he might say.

Wile’s second concept is what he calls the self-compassionate inner voice. In the situation mentioned above, there is a wonderful thing that could have been said and a horrible thing that could be said instead. You could confide or you could attack. Why do we not say the wonderful thing more often? To do so would require something that we often do not have. It would require a self-compassionate inner voice to contest the self-accusing inner voice that is already there. So in the example above, when the wife asked to skip the walk because her friend was in a crisis, the husband said that was all right. But the self-accusing inner voice in his head might go like this, “What is wrong with you, Dan? Are you so dependent on Alice that if she spends just a few hours with her friends you miss her? Do not be such a baby.” Perhaps the voice does not sound exactly like that, but it is in a lot of us. A self-compassionate

voice, on the other hand, might say, “Hey, wait a minute. Babies might be on to something. People miss people sometimes.” The conversation might continue like this, “Alice was away for barely two hours. You get lonely pretty quickly.” “It does not take long when you are unable to talk with Alice about what you feel.” “You cannot talk with Alice about it. It is enough that you know that you are a baby. You do not want to tell her.” “You could tell her if you wanted to. She would love to hear that you missed the walk. If you are worried that she would be put off by what you say, you can tell her that.” With the self-compassionate voice contesting the self-accusing voice he would be able to go to Alice and say, “I missed our walk more than I thought I would.” But if you do not have the ability to honor your desires and needs, or think it is all right to have some needs, the self-accusing voice wins. You are not going to say, “I missed our walk.”

Does this not sound easy and basic? What is so scary about saying, “I know I said you could go, but I missed our walk more than I thought.” That does not sound that hard. But there are an awful lot of situations in which people chronically get into big disagreements that are not that hard. I think Wile is right. This has more to do with the thoughts and attitudes that people have toward themselves, thoughts like, “I should not be so needy; I should not need her so much.”

Let us move on to the third fallback measure. If the husband cannot tell his wife that he missed the walk, if he lacks the self-compassion to be able to, in such a direct and eloquent way, deal with the immediate situation, he is stuck resorting to second-rate fallback measures that often just make matters worse. A direct and eloquent statement would be, “I missed the walk more than I thought I would.” The fallback measure is, “Do you always have to be everyone’s nurse?” In this case his fallback measure is to attack. Some of us have the fallback measure of avoiding. None of us have the fallback measure of confiding. Why do I say that none of us do? Because the fallback measure is what kicks in if we are not able to express the self-compassionate voice, and without the self-compassionate voice the self-accusing voice wins. At that point you are going to do one of the negative things.

The fourth concept has to do with the adversarial and avoidance shifts of everyday life. These are two major fallback measures. In the adversarial shift of everyday life, I take a feeling that makes me uneasy and turn it into something someone else is doing wrong. In the avoidance shift, I ignore it. If the feeling is, “I feel guilty about the things I said earlier,” the adversarial shift would sound like, “You are trying to make me feel guilty.” The avoidance shift would sound like, “Is there anything good on TV tonight?”

Wile summarizes these four concepts in one very long sentence: “The four concepts combined result in this, that you lack the self-compassion (concept two) and are unable to solve the moment (concept one) by making the elegant statement that turns your partner into an ally; you will be stuck as a fallback measure (concept three), making the adversarial shift of everyday life, which turns your partner into an enemy, or making the avoidance shift of everyday life, which turns your partner into a stranger.”

Wile has defined the process in that one sentence. He keeps in mind the way systems work and the struggle for us to pay attention. We talk about many of these elements in different ways. We have talked about the ability to notice or not, to pay attention, to know our own hearts, to look at them, and to put our hearts into play. He has defined this and wrapped all those things up in that one sentence. In those moments, get a hold of what is going on inside. Get a hold of the self-compassionate voice so that we can put those things in play. It is simple, but it is not easy. It is not complicated, but it is hard. Wile is right. When you are observing people you can see this. We can help people by slowing them down, asking questions to try to get them to express the self-compassionate voice. If they cannot do it, we can do it for them as a starting point.

What Wile has come up with here is interesting. I will tell you that I have wrestled with it myself. Is this a good way for Christians to think about this? Is it too self-centered? Ultimately, I have concluded that this is a description of what happens. What he describes is what happens. We need something that allows us to not too easily discount what we need. When we listen to that self-accusing voice and only it, we are discounting too much. We are putting behind us the stuff that is legitimate and that we need. In other words, Christians have legitimate needs. There are longings that are legitimate. Richard Winter talks about this. There are needs and longings that are legitimate, and there are needs and longings that are not legitimate. It is important to recognize that both of those exist. Sometimes people will react against Christian counselors who start by talking about how people have needs. They hear Maslow and psychology and they say, "That is not the Bible." But God's statement that it is not good for man to be alone is more important than we sometimes realize. An implication of that statement is that we need each other. We need a special one. We really need that. There is nothing wrong with that. That is a legitimate need that is built in.

Let me try to give a biblical foundation for the concept of self-awareness and its importance. Look at Ephesians 3, starting in verse 14. Paul is telling the Ephesians what he has prayed for them. This is the second time he is doing this. The first prayer begins in 1:15. Here in 3:14 he says, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." And then there is that great benediction, which begins by saying, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think..." In other words, it may seem like that is impossible, but God can do it. He can strengthen you in your inner being so that you can grasp, along with all the saints, how great His love is.

Think also about Genesis 2:24-25, where it says that Adam and Eve were naked without shame. Right there in the second chapter of Genesis God is paying attention to what is going on in the inner person: shame. Shame is not an external descriptor. In Ephesians Paul says in effect, "My prayer for you is that God will work in your inner being so that you will be strengthened so that you can love in that way." That is not an apologetic for self-awareness. All I can really say is that self-awareness has to be part of the process of being strengthened in our inner being.

How does sanctification work? In a grace-based understanding, sanctification typically occurs because we recognize a need. We see that we are not able to fix things ourselves, so we have to depend on God. Dependence usually includes something like praying for help. God helps, and we make an effort. It becomes something of a circular cycle that keeps going. We try; we recognize that we cannot do it; we really do need God; we are not able on our own; we depend on Him; we ask for help; God helps; we work; and we make some progress, but it is not complete. It seems like the process is something like that. We have to be aware of that, or we will not depend on God. We will not realize we are not able. Perhaps we will not realize we are even in need, and we will therefore not be aware of God's help. We will certainly not ask for it. Whatever effort we make will be made in our own strength. But typically, by His grace, God will not honor that. He knows that the last thing that would be good for us would be for us to do it in our own strength.

I think I have created an apologetic there, or a description, that all of that requires self-awareness. To be strengthened in your inner being and to grow, self-awareness has to be at work.

Does a lack of self-awareness hinder our ability to be aware of what other people need? Absolutely. Why do we spend so much time coming back to the idea that it is important to know your own heart? Because that actually becomes one of your greatest tools in paying attention to other people's hearts. There is a connection between understanding ourselves and our ability to see that same thing in someone else. The Bible tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Is it not interesting that the Bible connects those two things? At times I have cringed at the idea that I am supposed to love myself. Perhaps that is because it is harder to do. But God understands that loving yourself and loving your neighbor are related. Ephesians 5:33 tells husbands to love their wives as themselves. Earlier they are told to love their wives as Christ loves the church, but at the end of the chapter they are told to love their wives as themselves. Perhaps an important lesson to draw from that is that one of the most important things husbands need to do is to work on loving themselves more to be better husbands. The better they love themselves, which would include being aware of themselves, the more ability they are going to have to love their neighbor.

Let me explain a standard pattern of sin that works itself out in us. When something is stirring in us, when we are nervous about something, or when something is painful, our general approach as human people, as sons and daughters of Adam, is to ignore it. I think we are right to label that as a sin pattern. But by ignoring it we are less able to love others and to pay attention to their needs below the surface of behavior. When that happens we can end up having relationships that are fairly shallow, because we are not doing much to share at a deeper level.

My opinion is that this is much truer these days and that it has become truer and truer in the last 35 years or so because of the breakdown in relationships in the home and because of the high level of divorce. That has affected all of us. It is harder for us to relate at a heart-to-heart level. As a church we do not do well at looking beyond the things that are fairly easy to see. I hate to say that, but for those of us with a Reformed background, our tendency is to gravitate toward the cognitive areas. We work hard to make sure we are clear and right and saying the right things. There is strength in that. There is something good about it. But we can do it in a way that avoids the rest of the human person. It is a very incomplete understanding. But that view of sanctification is fairly similar to a behavioral, cognitive approach to counseling. That view of sanctification might lead to the following approach to counseling: A counselee has a problem. The counselor is going to listen to the problem because there is some information or knowledge that the counselee does not know or is not applying. The counselor's job is to deliver this information so that the counselee can start thinking about it and let it work through his or her life. That is how change comes. Change comes in a cognitive way, which leads to behavioral change.

But there is a missing part to the above. It is incomplete. What about the rest of the heart, which we defined as thinking, feeling, and will? That approach misses the feeling aspect. I think you are getting a clear understanding of how much feelings motivate, impact, and drive us. Feelings, which are unidentified, can drive us. They still operate. If we are going to help anyone change, we better have a full view, a whole-hearted view, of sanctification that will lead to change.

Daniel Wile is talking about some very practical stuff. Think about these three things as a counselor. A couple is likely in conflict because they are not confiding. Therefore listen to what they are not confiding about, and help them confide. Wile is not a believer, and he is not working out of a biblical model at all, and so the term "self-compassionate voice" will make you pause. But wrapped up in that is this sense of the importance of being aware of your whole heart. The self-accusing voice is inside you, and it is active. You need to pay attention to it and recognize that there is an alternative view. The self-accusing voice does not need to win. There is an alternative view. Wile is almost stumbling into

something that looks like what we have been talking about. He is not quite there; I do not want to give him too much credit. But in a certain way he is not saying something that is all that different.

Is it true that a lot of these heart issues are often expressed through the entertainment industry? Yes, I think that is true. I have two answers to that question, the second of which is a new thought. First, that is part of the reason why the expressive artists get as much attention as they do. They are doing something that people need to have done. It is not happening in the places that it should be happening. But let me mention a second point. I do not know if this is going to be generally true. I do not want to generalize too much. This past semester I received a certain number of assignments where people used music as a part of their project. However, they tended to use much more contemporary music than I tend to listen to. One of the things I recognized was that people were using these lyrics because they helped them understand marriage and family counseling and how the heart gets expressed. But, for the most part, the lyrics that were presented to me were confined to naming the stuff of the heart. They did not get too much beyond that. They did not describe what to do with that or its impact. They were simply saying that it exists. I found that to be interesting, and I became suspicious. Is this something that is more general for the generation? It might be.

One of the things I have been wrestling with for a number of years is the fact that the generation under me—I am a baby boomer—or perhaps two generations under me, in many ways, are better at relationships. For example, Starbucks could probably not have existed in my generation. We were not as prone to going somewhere basically to have conversation with whoever might be there. It is not just about coffee. It is about having a place to go to talk with friends or whoever. We have students who live at Starbucks. They are there eight hours a day. They see their friends. They write their papers at Starbucks. They take their computer. It is a place to meet and all of that. I am not criticizing that. I am saying that they have a lot more conversation than I think my generation typically did or does.

But there is something that has been nagging at me. It is that I do not know if that conversation goes very deep. I was wondering this as I paid attention to the music that was being presented to me as a model of expressing this deeper stuff. I was looking at it and thinking that it did not go that deep. It is descriptive. It names things. They exist. But it did not go much beyond that. Music is usually representative of the folks of that age range in some generalized way. I am not saying this to criticize. I am saying it to underline the need that, quite frankly, was created by the failures of my generation. If you are hearing me blaming the younger folks, that is not what I am doing. I am saying that what I am seeing looks like an effect of what we did.

I want to look at some further concepts from Wile, which are important concepts in collaborative couple therapy. The first one is what Wile refers to as leading-edge feelings and the unease of the moment. He says, “Repeatedly through the day people experience feelings of unease—twinges of jealousy, pangs of loneliness, crises of confidence, longings, apprehensions, disappointments, regrets—that they feel alone in and haunted by. The therapeutic goal is to help people turn their leading-edge feelings or thoughts, whether about the relationship or about anything else, which typically are these feelings of unease, into opportunities for intimacy.” Just to see them as opportunities for intimacy can be a big shift for people.

Wile is not saying that you need to share all these feelings. There can be a lot of those during the course of the day. That is not the point. But often we do not share any of them. Developing the habit of being able to do that is part of the habit of paying attention to your heart so that you can confide, for example, when you come home and you are anticipating talking with your wife, but she is talking on the phone to a friend and continues to do so. You need to have the ability to say, “I am sorry. I feel funny saying this, but I feel jealous of that great conversation you are having.” That is paying attention to those leading-

edge feelings and that discomfort. Perhaps a piece of this is learning to see the discomfort or uneasiness as a trigger for slowing down and paying attention. I think it is a crucial thing to talk with people about that and to ask them, “Where do you feel that uneasiness?” For them to actually locate it is helpful. If they can locate it and try to describe it, they are more able to recognize it when it comes again.

Think about a situation where you were looking to purchase something. I am thinking of an appliance my wife and I went to purchase. We needed a dishwasher, and so we went into a department store and talked with the salesperson about our need for a new dishwasher. We happen to have a well at our house, which has high lime content. As a result, appliances in our house have a shorter life. They get clogged up. That is how our dishwasher had died. It was very clear that repairs would not help.

Well, we were talking with this salesperson, and I do not remember the circumstances exactly, but he thought we should buy a particular one. We are the kind of people who want to get the best dishwasher for the least amount of money. So there is always that question of whether we are getting the best for the amount of money we are spending. We do not need all the special features, especially since we will probably have to buy a new one in five years because our water is going to clog it up, but we wanted a good one. But the salesperson was pushing us. He told us that we had 30 days to bring back a certain dishwasher if it did not work. I told him that I did not think it was the right one, but then he came back with another point. You know how that process goes. I have not described this very well, but you can put yourself in a situation like that, I am sure.

At some point in that situation all of us begin to feel something. We feel that we are being pushed. We feel uncomfortable. We feel uneasy. We feel pressured. We feel something. I am not a very assertive person naturally, and I was nurtured into being even less assertive, I think. As a result, earlier in life I would say yes just to get out of the situation because I was so uneasy about it. That gets you into trouble, by the way. Well, somebody along the way helped me to ask the question about where I feel my uneasiness. And then I recognized it. It was below the surface. It was down in there, and I just wanted it to go away. Before asking the question I had never really thought about it. I had simply responded out of it. Because of that question and the way it helped me to think about it, I recognize it when it happens. Over time I was able to turn it into a trigger for different behavior. When I get that feeling—it takes somebody pushing on me—the trigger leads me to say no. Even if I think I might like what is being sold, I say no. It is hard to sell me something I do not want now, even though I am not a very assertive person.

I am telling this as an example so that you can help people locate that uneasiness and pay attention to what is going on inside them. This is another way of talking about self-awareness. Now they have an opportunity to do something in a different way. In their relationship, if they can recognize uneasiness, it can be a trigger to talk. It can be a trigger to slow down and share with their spouse that they are struggling right now. That is how marriage is supposed to be, is it not? Husbands, are not wives supposed to be a helpmate? What better help is there than to be able to talk with her about issues that make you uneasy?

Wile’s second concept is about the inner conversation that goes on inside us. He says, “There is an inner conversation continually going on within each person that provides clues to the leading-edge feeling.” We should try to bring out this inner conversation as counselors. Make it explicit by creating a compassionate atmosphere, asking questions, and making guesses, which you announce as such. You might say, “I have a guess about this. I am wondering if you are not feeling this.” That is great advice. Pay attention to how people really are. Access it, use it, and put it into play.

If you ever get a chance to go hear Daniel Wile do a presentation on this material, it is worth going. It is usually not cheap, but it is worth doing. It is very helpful. One of the things he will do is get three volunteers from the audience and give them a script. One person plays the part of a client. Wile plays the part of himself, the therapist. Another person reads Wile's inner thoughts. And the fourth person reads the client's inner thoughts. It is very instructive, realistic, and funny. One conversation that I really appreciated went like this. Wile said something that was good, and the person who was narrating his thoughts said, "Oh, I am good." About a minute and a half later, Wile said something else and the person who was narrating his thoughts said, "Why did I ever get into this profession? What am I doing here? I do not have a clue. I am no good at this stuff." The first time I heard that I thought, "He read my mind. He knows exactly what I am thinking." That concept of an inner conversation is very helpful. We are not talking about craziness and hearing voices, but the way that we think. It is almost like a conversation with ourselves between that self-accusing and self-compassionate voice.

The third concept is loss of voice. This relates to the fallback measures of the adversarial and avoidance shifts of everyday life. If you are unable to confide your leading-edge feelings, which could turn your partner into an ally, you are forced as a fallback measure to make an adversarial or avoidance shift, which turns your partner into a stranger. A product of that is losing your voice. This is a tricky thing, because part of what we are trying to do is help both spouses voice their real concerns, struggles, and uneasy feelings. We could misunderstand this as trying to give both spouses power. I want to think about it as helping them be real, and that is different. If it turns into being powerful, powerful people tend to attack each other, as opposed to confiding in each other. Being real is a different thing. Perhaps a big reason why I pause here and take this in a different direction than Wile takes it is because I have watched too many divorces recently in Christian circles, circles that I have friends in. I have seen situations develop where one spouse feels like to be real they have to exercise more power than what they have been exercising. But that drives a wedge between them, which is problematic.

The fourth concept is to create a platform. A premier way to deal with couple problems is to move to another level. Create a compassionate, non-accusing, shared vantage point from which to talk about the problem. Another way to say that is help people develop a relationship about their relationship. They need to have a conversation about how they do relationship. They can have a conversation about their uneasy feelings and how they talk together about the uneasy feelings. It is not so much about the content of the uneasy feelings—though that needs to be talked about, too—but how to talk about them. What is the process?

The fifth concept is solving the moment rather than solving the problem. We have talked about that. The sixth concept is the recovery conversation. Since it is difficult or impossible to avoid fights, place your emphasis on helping partners recover from their fights by creating a platform from which they can appreciate how the positions of each spouse make sense and how the two of them got stuck defending their position rather than trying to talk about each other's uneasy feelings.

The seventh concept deals with unsolvable problems. I said in an earlier lesson that Gottman, in his theory of the sound marital house, was the only person, or one of the only people, who talks about perpetual problems. I was not thinking about Wile, who also recognizes that there are some things that are unsolvable. He says, "Starting a relationship means choosing a set of unsolvable problems that the partners will be struggling with for the life of the relationship. The premier way to deal with such problems is by creating the joint platform that turns moment-to-moment manifestations of these problems into opportunities for intimacy." That is what Gottman referred to as maintaining the dialogue. Wile says, "Your job is to become a special spokesperson for the partner who, at the moment, you find yourself siding against, since that is the partner who is engaged in the more off-putting fallback

measures—that is, just reacting to the more flagrant way of his or her loss of voice.” What is he saying? Pay attention to which spouse you are having the most trouble with at a given moment. Wile says that is the one who you move toward because that is the one who is struggling the most with the uneasy feelings, and they are falling back into the fallback measures rather than being able to confide. So move toward them. Try to figure it out. Try to help them confide. You will make more progress that way.

The concept of the self-compassionate voice, which we talked about earlier, may help us best be prepared for repentance. Part of self-compassion is the ability to accept ourselves as imperfect. Sue Johnson has an example that illustrates this. Imagine that you are at a party and the hostess gives you a tray to set out, but you drop it. It takes a certain amount of self-compassion, of all things, to be able to just accept it. I dropped it. If I do not have that self-compassion, I will need to defend myself. I will be at risk. I will feel vulnerable. I will feel shame, worthlessness, or inadequacy. Self-compassion is not just feeling good about yourself, it is accepting yourself, good and bad. In that moment when I drop the tray, it takes self-compassion to be able to know that sometimes I am clumsy. Sometimes I make mistakes. But I have enough self-compassion that I do not allow that to destroy my identity. I am an imperfect human being. If I have that, I will be more ready to apologize—the element of repentance—to say I am sorry, to admit my responsibility. It is a bit tricky. It can be turned the other way, too. We are good at confiding in a way that turns our confession into a club. We might even say, “I am going to tell you again how you hurt me.” It is tricky.

Let us move on to something else. That gives you some tools for thinking about conflict, which are fairly consistent with what we have been talking about.

Let us talk about sexual issues. I want to mention a couple of resources. One is a book called *Pure Desire* by Ted Roberts, which has a copyright of 1999. Chapters 3 through 5 address distortions in sexuality. Those chapters are entitled “When Sex Gets Sick in the Heart,” “Clueless in the Midst of the Battle,” and “The Answers to a Wounded Heart.” Another resource is a short article by Meg Meeker from the journal *Christian Counseling Today* called “The High Cost of Sexualizing our Youth.”

Let us look at Dr. Meeker’s article. It is powerful. We will not read the whole thing, but we will point out some highlights. Dr. Meeker is a medical doctor, a gynecologist. She works with a lot of teenagers and ended up making the following observations. Let us look at a section in the article entitled “Her Problem is Our Problem.” Dr. Meeker has been telling the story of Abigail. She says, “If Abigail’s story were rare, I would not write today, but it is not. The number of Abigails in your office and mine has skyrocketed over the last 25 years. Why did she allow oral sex one day? Why did she try to kill herself afterward even though she kept her virginity? The reasons are complex, and the answers are not for the weak-hearted. Abigail is a child victim of a toxic sexual culture which you and I have created. We, those who gave momentum to the sexual revolution of the 1970s, have unleashed a horror of physical, emotional, and spiritual pains upon our children. We must do something about it. Abigail’s problem is our problem, because she is a child with incomplete cognitive maturity. She cannot fix the ills of such great magnitude. We must do it for her.”

Look at one of those sentences again. “We have unleashed a horror of physical, emotional, and spiritual pains upon our children.” Dr. Meeker has an assumption there that is hard in our culture to maintain. It is that sex is something more than physical. When she says that we have unleashed a physical, emotional, and spiritual horror, she is recognizing that sex has physical, emotional, and spiritual impact. You may know that. That may be second-nature to you. But it is not second nature to most people. It is not the way our culture thinks. In the sexual revolution of the 1970s—I think it started earlier than that, actually, in the late 1960s—part of what happened was that the physical aspects, including physical pleasure,



were separated from emotional and spiritual things as if they were supposed to be. That has been the basic message that has been communicated for all those decades since, now close to 40 years. Meeker describes the physical fallout of the sexual revolution. A few of the facts that are in her article are alarming.

“Several years ago after one too many Abigails in my office, I turned to the medical literature to determine if my experience was unique. I naively hoped that I had a skewed medical practice. Perhaps I had an unusual affinity for teens with depression and STDs (sexually transmitted diseases). This is what I uncovered. According to the Center for Disease Control, the United States is experiencing an epidemic of STDs among our youth, the likes of which we have never before seen.” Did you know that? I did not before I read this. “In 1960, the United States contended with gonorrhea and syphilis alone.” In other words, there were two STDs. “A quick injection of penicillin in the buttocks, and the patient was on his way. By 2000, 40 years later, we had approximately 30 STDs. According to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1 in 5 people over 12 years old test positive for genital herpes. In 2002, the *Sexually Transmitted Diseases Journal* stated in an article that if we do not dramatically change course, 39 percent of all men and 49 percent of all women in the United States would have genital herpes by the year 2025.” Meeker says, “I am not an alarmist by nature [...] but, friends, we have a very, very serious problem on our hands.” I will not read the rest of that part, but she gives some other details.

Let me read from a section in the article entitled “The Emotional Toll.” “The literature regarding the cause and effect of sexual activity and depression among teens is not slim. Research from the medical literature clearly confirms an association between sex and depression in teens.” In other words, teens who are sexually active are more likely to be depressed. “But which comes first, depression or sexual activity? Over 20 years I have seen thousands of teens, and I rarely see a sexually active teen girl or boy who does not struggle at some point with low self esteem, regret, confusion, or mild or severe depression. Why would this be? While the literature may not dissect the problem, let us apply sound psychological principles. Consider the losses incurred from sexual activity during the teen years.” That is a unique statement. Very few people in the culture are saying that if you will be sexually active as a teenager you are going to lose something. But it is important for us to have a grasp on that. That will also help us understand how sex functions in marriage.

Meeker continues, “One of the losses is the loss of control. Internalizing parental authority and defining an order and discipline to one’s world is crucial to healthy psychological maturity during the teen years. We emphatically teach teens to take control of their athletic and academic endeavors, that they have the capacity to avoid drugs and alcohol and discipline their speech and behavior toward others. Yet when it comes to sexual activity, the adult community at large sends a loud message, ‘You cannot, nor should you have to, pull the reins in on your sexual activity. Sexual impulses are too strong for you to effectively control.’ Teens internalize the belief that all in their world can be controlled but remain confused, even frightened, about sexual activity. It becomes this behavior which is inevitable, powerful, and untamable, and it must be had in order to feel significant, adult-like, or desirable. So a young girl gives it a try. Usually sex brings neither pleasure, comfort, nor lasting feelings of acceptance. Rather, it leaves her with a pile of losses to be grieved. For several moments she was not in control; he was or they were [...] An illusion was created in her mind that sex was unbelievable and she was missing out. She fell for the lie that she should not, could not be in charge of her sexual feelings and surrendered them to another.”

“Loss of Trust. Trusting a sexual partner taps into perhaps the greatest vulnerability a man or a woman can feel. Modesty is a God-given, self-protective response to guard that which is most private. For a teen boy, peeling away the reflex to protect and expose his most intimate body parts and sensibilities

connotes to another that his partner is trustworthy. She will accept and share a level of intimacy to which others do not yet know. These feelings may not be conscious, or indeed our culture may sneer at their very presence, but we cannot be so calloused. Even in the most hardened sexually active teen they are real. Sex is intimate; it is mysterious, and it demands trust when given to another.”

“After the sexual act, teens go home or back to school. In most cases the sexual couple breaks up. When the break occurs trust is again broken because the precious piece given was taken away for good. It is interesting to note that one of the reasons for the increase in popularity of oral sex among teens is to guard one’s virginity. Even to sexually experienced teens, virginity is honorable and desirable.”

“Loss of Intimacy. One of the greatest needs our Father has given each human is the need for deep connection, not only with Him, but with other humans. The ultimate form of emotional, physical, and spiritual connection is the sexual act. Even as Abercrombie, MTV, and Madonna force their tentacles into the tender psyches of our children, ironically teaching that sex is everything and yet nothing, teens know better. All of them know the truth that sex is a profound expression of intimacy. It rests in the conscience of almost every child, and this truth wins. So when the girl engages in sex, subconsciously she hopes for an experience of deep connection. She wants something, to be seen, loved, appreciated, and valued. These she hopes will come from the sexual experience.” For a long time it has been known that one of the best ways to help girls make good decisions is for fathers to have good relationships with their daughters. To have that connection, to have that intimacy, obviously appropriately, enables girls to be less prone to look for it somewhere else. They do not need it.

“Spiritual Fallout. When the deepest and most beautiful expression of intimacy created by God is mocked, His heart is broken. This is the most devastating consequence of the sexual revolution. For this reason alone we should fight to reverse it.” I will not read more of that. I think you get the point. It is a different perspective. She alerts us to the fact that we are living in a world that is teaching us this, and it is easy to absorb. As Francis Schaeffer said about other things, it is like the fog that comes in under the door. We breathe it in. It is hard to not be modified in our attitudes about sexual things.

These other ways of thinking come across in music, stories, TV, movies, conversations, and radio. I am old enough to remember when what was transmitted in media was very controlled. You can argue whether that is good, bad, or indifferent. All I am saying is that we had attitudes in place that conveyed that we needed to be careful about this. There was not casual conversation about sexual activity occurring between co-hosts on talk radio shows in the morning. As a father who was in charge of transportation for my daughters a lot of the time, I could not anticipate always what was coming on the radio, and we heard things that never would have been there before. The attitude is that this is easy and normal to talk about. What we are talking about is just a physical thing. It is not emotional. We do not have to talk about that aspect.

One of our favorite movies as a family is “While You Were Sleeping.” In that movie Sandra Bullock works as the person who takes the tokens on the elevated train in Chicago. There is a guy who comes there every day whom she thinks she is madly in love with. Well, he gets mugged, ends up falling on the train tracks, and she goes and saves him as the train is coming. He is in a coma, and people think she is his fiancée. There is misunderstanding about that and the story goes on. In the course of time, he wakes up but he has amnesia, so he does not know that she is not his fiancée. The girl he has been living with is actually out of the country. So people are moving forward for this wedding, and she does not know how to tell this guy that she is not his fiancée, because she is afraid it is going to affect his fragile psyche. Meanwhile, she is starting to fall in love with his brother. It is a very interesting story, actually.

Well, Bullock is working her last day in the subway because this guy whom she is going to marry, Peter, is a stock broker who makes lots of money. So she is working with her friend, who collects tokens with her, when her friend makes a comment about sex. But Bullock says, "Oh, we have not done that." The friend is bewildered. The writers are assuming that everyone will be assuming that if you are dating and it is a serious dating relationship, then of course you are having sex. The humor that is written into the moment, the puzzlement, the confusion, and the response that Bullock gives that is intended to be humorous is based on the assumption that everyone else is going to assume they are having sex.

But that is just a small thing, is it not? Not really! It carries great weight, especially when it is multiplied in song after song, story after story, announcer after announcer, and movie after movie. We get so used to it that we do not even normally recognize it. I am sure that is the case, because I am often surprised at the movies that seminary students recommend I go watch. That can happen in one of two ways. Someone might come to me and say that a certain movie is a good one to rent, but there are a couple parts that I might want to fast-forward through. Or, someone says that a certain movie is great and I need to go see it in the theatre. Apparently they have not picked up on anything being wrong. They have missed it because they have gotten so used to it. They do not recognize that there is content in this movie that we should be careful with. They must not be thinking that, because they have not said anything to me about that. I am not being critical of those people. I am just being observant. I know that I can do the same thing. I can get so used to things that I do not notice them. Dr. Meeker's work helps us to think about that. We need to think about it because it is what we are working against as we start to deal with the question, what is sex for? We need to think about what the Bible says about it and how God wants us to think about sex and marriage. We have to recognize that we are going to have to fight against some of those things that sneak under the door like the fog and affect us more than we know.

Ultimately, sex is for nourishing the relationship. There is a bond that sex creates. There is power in sex, which God built into it. That is why Paul says, "Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her?" Sex is intended to nourish the bond that we experience with each other. It is intended to be representative of this two-person Trinity, as we have been calling it. That is perhaps best represented by this physical act where the two are one. That is an intention of it. Sex represents and nourishes the reality at the same time. Certainly pleasure happens and all those good things. That is a part of that emotional bonding and connection that happens. Sex is about that bond, trust, closeness, mutual submission, and whole-person connection. I ran out of adjectives. Sex is powerful, glorious, and good, and God intends it to be that way.

In recent months, I have been struggling with the concern that, as Christians, we struggle to look at sex as the glorious thing that it is. There are lots of distortions and lots of painful things. Many of us have had painful experiences, and terrible things have happened. It can be hard because of those things, but also because we do not have much help from the culture, giving us better messages. And we do not get a lot of messages in the church. There is not a lot of preaching or Sunday school classes on it. Youth workers are probably doing better than those working with adults, but not a lot.

Because I get to know things about people's marriages, one of the things I am finding out is that there is often not a lot of sex in Christian marriages. People think that is all right. I do not think it is. I am not saying that is universal. I do not want to generalize. I obviously have a sample that is slanted in a certain direction because most of the people whom I am talking with are struggling. It is not a sample of the strongest marriages. But there is lots of struggle sexually. People struggle to think about sex as being a good thing, so they do not realize that they are struggling sexually. They do not realize that it is a problem that they are only having sex once a month, or once every six months, or once a year. I am not sure what to do with that.

Lots of things contribute to this problem, but I want to begin our conversation about sex by recognizing that we need to become more comfortable thinking about it. We need to recognize and remember the great and glorious thing that it is and not just say that as a theological statement when we confess God's good creation. We need to actually recognize that it is a wonderful gift reserved for those in committed, covenant relationships. Couples should be pursuing it together, regularly. It should be a great thing. Because it is representative of the relationship, if we are not pursuing it, that is indicative of something. It cannot be separated out. It should not be that we have our relationship and we have our sex life. You have a marriage. Because sex is representative, if it is not fairly frequent, fairly good, and something you can talk about, then it is a sign that there is something with the relationship that is missing. It is a fairly good sign that there is not enough intimacy. There should be enough intimacy that it naturally flows into a good, active, healthy sexual relationship. These days, a lot of times business conquers a good sexual relationship among married couples. Business is undermining our intimacy and connection as couples.

There is no question that as you work with couples you are going to have folks who are struggling in this area. By the way, and we will come back to this later, very seldom do I talk to people at great detail about sexual things. We need to be comfortable enough to check in on it. It is a great diagnostic. But most of the time it comes around to talking about the relational aspect of things. That is really where the problem is.

Another common reason for a problem is sexual abuse. Something has happened that has not been dealt with. Perhaps one of the spouses did not even know. But more often, the struggle is simply because something that is going on with the relationship. Ninety-nine percent of the time in my practice, when it becomes apparent that a couple is struggling sexually, we start doing relational stuff. We help people do what Daniel Wile talks about. I help them start solving some moments. When they get better at that, often I will come back and ask what is happening in their sexual relationship, and they will just smile. We do not even need to talk about it. Things are better because their relationship gets stronger, and when there is better connection, it smoothes over the difficulties that come up sexually. That is the case most of the time. It is not always the case, but most of the time it is the case.