

Sexual Issues in Marriage – Part 1

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In our last lesson we talked about Daniel Wile's work and how he described leading-edge feelings and the uneasiness that comes with them. Chris Smither captures something of that in his music. Chris Smither was born in 1944, so that makes him about 64. He wrote the song "Father's Day" about 3 years ago when he was about 61. My friend was at a concert where, in the introduction to this song, he talked about how he knew he wanted to write a song about his father, but he was waiting for his father to die before he did. But his father kept living, so he thought he better write it anyway. At one point in the song he captures something of the uneasiness we have been talking about when he says, "small time left to make that small time right / It takes so long to say more than good night / Those last lines are the toughest / Last one out please shut out the light." He is really asking his father, "Am I all right? How did I do?" He really needs to hear that from his father. At the end he really says to his dad, "You did all right, too." You can sense something of the challenge and difficulty of being able to speak those words to each other. It is especially difficult for fathers and sons, I think. I think Smither has captured something there that is important.

We were talking about sexual issues in our last lesson, and I want to pick up there again. In talking about what sex is for, we recognized that our culture has separated sex from its context and its purpose. The Bible makes it clear that sex has a proper context. It also has a purpose. There is power to it. It is more than just an event. It actually does something. So Paul can say, "Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her?" (1 Corinthians 6:16). A corollary of that is that sexual difficulties are usually a symptom of something else. They are usually a sign of other issues, which I usually think are bigger issues. It usually has something to do with the challenges of developing intimacy together, developing comfort together, knowing each other, and, in a very real sense, of being naked without shame. We should treat the symptom and the cause. We do not want to ignore the symptom and just go after the cause. But to treat only the symptom is problematic and generally does not lead to any lasting change.

Let us talk about general types of sexual difficulties. There are four categories. If a couple comes in to see you and says, "We are really struggling sexually," you will want to explore all of these areas. It may be more than one. We want to have an eye toward all four. First, there can be physical problems. Therefore one of our first questions should be, "Have you talked to your doctor?" There could be physical problems that we have no way of discerning. They may really need to talk to their doctor. I usually start with their family doctor, internist, or whomever it would be, assuming that they would be comfortable with that person. However, it is not uncommon for people to say that they have not talked about it with their doctor, because they are not comfortable talking about it. But with our encouragement, hopefully they would be.

Second, there could be psychological problems, and individual counseling may be appropriate. I usually suggest that it should be supplemented with couples counseling, however, because it is having an effect in the relationship. Individual dynamics will usually be intermingled with couple dynamics.

Third, sometimes it is a matter of some level of ignorance. You may want to use a manual of some sort. Gary Smalley's would be my choice. There are others from a Christian perspective, but be careful about the focus of the manual. One of the reasons I choose Smalley's because he does a good job of not focusing only on technique and physical things. He does not have a performance mentality. He

recognizes that sexuality is a heart issue, meaning that what we think and feel affects the choices that we make.

So it can be a matter of ignorance, but most of the time relationship factors will be involved. That is the fourth category. Recognize that the sexual relationship is intended to be representative of the relationship. It is not just for pleasure, procreation, or for some other narrow purpose. It is a product of the relationship as well as representative of it. We have said that already. So when a couple is struggling sexually, we need to go after the relational aspects and focus on what is happening between them. We may end up doing something that looks like what Daniel Wile does, which we talked about in the context of conflict. It may not be a matter of conflict as much as it is the inability to or difficulty with just talking about the stuff of life.

Perhaps the most common combination of factors these days is that one of the partners has been sexually abused, and it obviously impacts the relationship and the sexual aspect of the marriage. But they have a hard time talking about it. It is hard. It is really hard. It can be a frustrating experience for husbands because the way things can play out. If the woman was the one who was sexually abused, she can respond in such a way as though it were the husband who is abusing her. Husbands can get frustrated with that. It does not feel right. They love this person. They are supposed to be able to have sex. They are married. But it does not work out well.

Victims of sexual abuse often feel ambivalence about sex because of what happened to them. That is because of the mixture of pleasure and pain that they experienced. In the abuse, unless it was very violent, and even then this is sometimes still the case, if the person is physically healthy there will be some measure of pleasure. Further, there is often something special emotionally about the relationship, particularly for children. People value that connection. Now, obviously it is for all the wrong reasons. Wrong things are happening. That is what makes it so hard to adjust to. The body still works the way God intended it to work. And the emotions still work. So the child has a special relationship with the person. Gradually, as the child gets more perspective, they realize that it is very wrong. But it does not change the fact that they may have looked forward to it and enjoyed the relationship and the sexual aspect of it. That leads to a great, great level of shame. They want to know what is wrong with them that they would look forward to this and enjoy it. That stays connected to pleasure itself, particularly sexual pleasure. So the experience of sexual pleasure is painful. It is a mixed experience because of that strong ambivalence. And that becomes difficult to talk about for the couple, because the husband is being a normal husband. This thing that is supposed to represent and nourish their relationship does not work out the way it is supposed to. The responses from the wife may be negative or she may just be neutral.

I am thinking of a couple whom I worked with. I think I mentioned them before. She had been sexually abused. We had a list of things to work on when they came to see me. Toward the bottom of that list of things to work on was their sexual relationship. She explained that when they were having intercourse she went somewhere else in her mind. I assumed that was the same thing she did when she was being abused as a child. She went somewhere else. There is an amazing ability that God has built into us that enables us to do that mentally. It was used in a way to protect her, but now she was stuck in it. Why? Because pleasure is not merely pleasure for her. Pleasure is painful. Pleasure is a reminder for her. Pleasure stirs up shame and leads her to ask, "What is wrong with me that would lead me to enjoy this?" It is difficult to separate the different contexts from each other.

I would say that is the most common thing you will see, and that is going to require a good bit of work with the couple, and maybe some individual work with the one who was abused. Now, I am of the opinion that the best way to work with a woman who has been sexually abused is with her husband

present. That is probably just because that is the way I have done it and it has been effective. Sometimes the husband is sort of a co-therapist, and sometimes we are working on couple issues. When I have done that there have been lots of times that there is so much that is happening in these sessions that it would be impossible for her to go home and keep her husband up with what was discussed. There is no way to redo it or recount it. A great risk if I were doing that individually is that over time, and it would not take a lot of time actually, I would become the man who understands her better than anybody else, even better than her husband. That is not a good thing.

There are no set rules about this, it seems to me, like that you should never see a woman alone if you are a man, or you should never see a man alone if you are a woman. We do not have set rules like that. I do not think that is appropriate. But, at the same time, we really need to be wise. Actually, in general I do not do individual therapy with women. I stay confined to marriages. I know that the worst thing I could be doing is talking about marriage with an individual, especially with the wife. The worst thing I could do is do my job well and become more understanding than her husband. If I do that I have not done a good thing. Perhaps I would help her think about some things, but I will not have done a good thing. It sets her up to do one of the worst things possible, which would be to go home and say, "Dan says..." in the midst of a conflict. I have taken that principle and applied it to women who are sexually abused. I have witnessed lots of advantages to having husbands in the room.

Let us talk about factors that contribute to relational difficulties. One factor is an unresolved history or a history that has not been confessed. This applies to premarital counseling. In premarital counseling we need to make sure the couple has talked about, to a certain level, each person's sexual history. They need to know where they have been and what they have done. The couple needs to decide together how much detail they need about that. I am not saying they need to know all of the gory details. But they need to know that history. One reason I say that is because I have some ideas about how the enemy works. One of the ways he works is by reminding us of things at the worst times. People who have a sexual history before they were married should expect, for example, to be reminded of it on their wedding night. The first time they are having intercourse there is a memory of that other one. There is a comparison that might start. I trust the enemy to be enemy-like and make sure those things happen. If you have had sexual intercourse before you were married, or whatever the sexual history is, I believe it is important to talk about that so that it is not such a secret. The fewer secrets there are the easier it will be. The unresolved history or the history that has not been confessed might relate to abuse or to other things. It does not have to be rape or something like that. It could simply be things that people have not grieved over, the losses that Dr. Meeker talks about. There are losses that are involved when sexual activity occurs in the wrong context. If those things have not been grieved to the point where we have accepted that history and know that we are forgiven, it can become the fertile soil for relational difficulties.

Another cause of relational difficulties is communication issues. I think this is fairly clear. I am referring to the difficulty to really confide. If we are stuck in attack or withdrawal mode, particularly the pursuit and distance kinds of reactions that are typical for most couples, it can lead to relational difficulties.

Another cause of relational difficulties is that male and female differences are not understood by the couple. I do not emphasize this too much. I think we can put too much weight on the fact that men and women are different. But we really are. It is important to recognize that we come to the sexual experience thinking about it differently, feeling it differently, and experiencing it differently. As an example, men often feel like they reach intimacy through sex. Women, on the other hand, often feel like when they get to the intimacy sex will happen. In actuality, this dynamic is circular. The sex and the relationship feed each other. We may think about it in terms of there being different entrance ramps to

the circle for men and women. The point, however, is to get into the circle and keep moving so that both of those things are happening together and feeding each other as we go through that experience.

Do I ever use sex as a diagnostic in counseling? Yes. If it is weird or boring, if not much is happening, or if there is lots happening but it is very one-sided, there is something going on. If we do not ask couples about their sexual relationship we are missing something. This goes back to the fact that we need to be comfortable talking about sexual things. We need to be at least comfortable enough to ask the question.

Let me mention some good resources for sexual abuse. Two come to mind for me. One is Dan Allender's *Wounded Heart*. The other resource is Diane Langberg's book for folks who have been sexually abused. Langberg has two books. One is for the helpers, people who help people who have been sexually abused, called *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. The other book is for the victims. I forget the title of that right now. In preparing to write these books, Diane Langberg did lots of thinking about trauma. So her book is very helpful in thinking about the traumatic aspects of sexual abuse. Langberg read things from people who were in prison camps and people who had gone through recent wars, and she has worked with people very intensely. She has a very good grip on trauma and what it takes from you as a counselor, what it costs you, to go to those places with people and deal with those traumatic things, to help them go back through rather than around those traumatic memories. One of the strengths of Allender's book is that it is not just about sexual abuse. He talks about sexual abuse, but you get a really good understanding of how people work and respond to difficult things. It applies even to people who have not been sexually abused. So they are both good books.

Let me give a few suggestions for helping people wrestle with sexual difficulty. Help them appreciate the differences in how men and women think about sexuality. Help them talk about those differences together, remembering that intimacy is built by keeping secrets. Part of their secret-keeping should be for the couple to talk about what sex means for each one personally in a way that they do not talk with anybody else. It is far better for a wife to share as much as she possibly can with her husband than with a close girlfriend or her mom. I know people do that. I understand that it can feel easier. But what I am saying is that for intimacy's sake, talking about the secrets with somebody else diminishes the intimacy in the marriage. It is far better for a husband to talk with his wife about his experience, his doubts, his concerns, and his insecurities than to meet with a couple of guys and talk about it with them. I am not banning that kind of conversation. It can be important. What I am trying to ban is the idea that that kind of conversation only happens somewhere else. If it happens somewhere else, then it ought to come back into the marriage as well, or else it is diminishing the intimacy. There is something very important to one spouse that is being shared outside of the marriage and not inside the marriage. Certainly the largest percentage of that sort of thing needs to be shared only inside the marriage.

Men's sexuality is powerful. It is a driving force. Little gets in the way. Women's sexuality, on the other hand, is fragile. It is shaped by many factors, and it does not take much to hamper it. I think that is a principle for men and women generally, even outside the area of sexuality. My pastor, who grew up in a family of six, heard certain statements from his parents as he was growing up about the differences between males and females. There were sons and daughters, brothers and sisters in this family. My pastor's parents came up with this observation. Boys have friends for one reason, whatever it is. It only takes one thing for boys to be friends. If there is a list of 10 things, there might be nine things on the list that they do not agree on or are not interested in. But if there is one thing, that is enough for them to be friends. Boys have friends for one reason. Girls, on the other hand, do not have friends for one reason. There may be nine things on the list that they agree on, but if there is one thing that they do not agree on, that may be enough to not have friendship.

Well, that works in parallel fashion to sexuality. Men can be moving forward and thinking about it for one reason. Women may be stopped in that process for one reason. That partly explains why guys sometimes do not understand why their wives are not interested in sex if they have been working outside all day, have not shaved, stink, and have bits of mulch stuck to them. They come inside and see their wife in her apron, and for some reason that just looks really good. So they move over and put their arm around her, but she says, "Do not even think about it. I know where you are going. That train has left the station, and I am not on it." It only takes one thing. Now, the truth is, there is more than one thing there for her, in the way I described it. But do you get it? Sexuality is strong for him. For her it is more fragile. Well, help men and women understand that. Help both the men and the women. That is just one of the differences.

This is something that comes out of a book called *Secrets of Eve* by Archibald Hart, a Christian psychologist. Archibald Hart wrote an earlier book with good survey material on sexual behavior, habits, and help for Christian men. Then he wrote *Secrets of Eve* as a follow-up a few years later for Christian women. In the book, they surveyed either 2000 or 2500 Christian women and then compared those data to a much bigger survey that they had done on the general population, which would include Christians and non-Christians to some unknown extent. The book has some wonderful and enlightening data and some good, wise, and safe advice. *Secrets of Eve* is a good book. I have used it for Sunday school classes. I have recommended it for couples, not just for wives. And the book for men is helpful too, though I forget the title. But what I am talking about now is out of *Secrets of Eve*.

Marital happiness and sexual satisfaction are related, and sexual satisfaction and sexual frequency are related. That makes sense. I think we would all agree that sex is not just a stand-alone thing. It is representative and nourishing of the relationship. That being the case, there is going to be a relationship between how good we feel about our marriage and how we feel about our sexual experience. And how we feel about our sexual experience is going to have something to do with frequency.

Let me talk about that for a moment. I said in an earlier lesson that in every marriage the two partners have different levels of desire. You will remember when we went through Frank Pittman's *Grow Up!* and read a few of the suggestions he makes, he said that you should go for the level of frequency of the person who wants it most. I really disagree with that for one reason that I think will be clear. I think we should go for a middle point. My opinion is that if you arrive at his or her level, it creates a great opportunity for someone to be resentful and misunderstanding. It creates the opportunity for one spouse to feel like the other one is in control. A huge dynamic in sexual issues, by the way, is power. Sex and money are really about power. There are four things that people who get divorced tend to mention as the reason for their divorce. The four things are sexual issues, money issues, parenting issues, and in-law issues. Well, sex and money are about power. In-laws and parenting are really about boundaries. Helping people work through boundaries and power in the marriage relationship is a crucial thing. When a couple talks with you about sexual issues, keep an ear open for who is deciding what is going to happen and when. Who is deciding what and when? If one spouse is happy if sex happens once a week, and the other spouse is happy if sex happens once a day, and if it happens once a day, then the one who would be happier if it were less than that is most likely going to feel like the other spouse has exercised power in such a way that they got what they wanted. So pay attention to that. I do not agree with Pittman. I do not disagree with him very often. If the options are once a day or once a week, somewhere in the middle might be the best to keep that power in its place. A couple needs to work at this together and find a place that is theirs so that sexuality does not become a problem issue, but it becomes a good, supportive, nurturing aspect of the marriage.

One difficulty is that sexual frequency is related to how often you think about sex. The spouse who desires to have sex every day is thinking about sex at least every day. The spouse who desires to have sex once a week is probably only thinking about sex once or twice a week, not once a day. So in trying to move to that place in the middle, one of the questions to ask will be, how can the one spouse think about this more? Part of the answer will be giving each other permission to have conversation about it more. Have different kinds of conversation, not just, "Hey, how about it?" Perhaps in the morning one spouse could say, "I was thinking tonight maybe." That conversation is not just about whether or not they have intercourse that night. It is about inviting the other person to think about it. It helps the other person think about it. The tone of the conversation will sound different. How often we think about sex is a big piece of the problem. The average man thinks about sex daily. The average woman thinks about sex weekly. Typically, then, the husband wants sex more frequently than his wife. That is not always the case, though. Do not be fooled by that. Gender differences are not deterministic.

Encourage couples to slow down and explore touch without sexual expectation. Go back and think about those magic five hours. Think about daily affection and playfulness. If sex happens, great. But that is not the purpose. Recognize the differences and seek harmony. That is the same as saying that you need to help couples try to find their way.

Help couples recognize the challenges to sexual adjustment, like time, priorities, business, and the clutter in our schedules. Work on those things so that they make the relationship truly a priority. Look at restoring energy, which is about priorities, clutter in our schedule, making sleep a priority, treating physical conditions, exercising, and resolving emotional issues. Recognize that children, the wonderful blessing that they are, from the moment of their birth are intruders. They are intruders. They are wonderful intruders. It is great to have them around. But we need to put boundaries in place for them to protect our relationship. There needs to be some time in our relationship that is just ours.

Bill Doherty, you may remember, in *Take Back Your Marriage*, talks about everyday connection. He talks about the fact that he and his wife set a time after dinner each night where they had coffee. They talked until they finished their coffee. They set rules. That was not time to do logistics. It is just relational time. And they put boundaries up for the kids. They were not allowed to interrupt. I think he said something like that if there was an emergency they could call 911. If somebody was bleeding, it was all right. But you need to set that up with the kids. They were not hurting the kids. They were doing a good thing for them. The kids saw that their mom and dad talk. They knew they could not talk to them at that moment because they were connecting. That is a good thing. Too many of us do not do enough of that. The kids actually become the focus of the relationship.

Here is a truth that we often ignore. The truth is that these little ones, from day one, are better at getting their needs met than spouses are. We think we can sort of give it up. We think that we will focus on the kids for the next 25 years and then we can come back together. We think that because we are living together and raising the kids that we are growing. But that is not true. In certain ways, it may be true. But without that time together without the kids, it is really hindered. That is why things like kids having a regular bedtime has something to do with your sex life. Going to bed at the same time as your spouse has something to do with your sexual relationship. Having a lock on your door has something to do with your sexual relationship. How you treat your bedroom and your bed has something to do with your sexual relationship. If kids are sleeping in your bed, you have a problem. You just do. I understand how that starts. It starts when moms are nursing. Lots of people have done it. We have done it, too. With little ones it is far easier. But often—I have seen this a fair amount—those kids are not nursing anymore but they are still there. Or they get scared in the night and they are there. It gets really tough to get them out.

I do not know if you are aware of that or not, but it becomes problematic. It is a lack of boundaries. We need to have some good boundaries.

Let me remind you of the book *Close Calls*. You may remember that Dave Carder uses the illustration of a three-legged stool to talk about the nature of an affair. Dave Carder learned about factors that lead to affairs and then said, in effect, "Put that back in your marriage." It is quite startling, actually. I was reading this in a class recently, and people were really uncomfortable. There was more laughter than there has ever been because they were so uncomfortable. He actually tells you to put the components that led to the affair back into your marriage. Does that feel right? He is right, I think. The three legs of his stool are childhood magic, adolescent sexuality, and adult mobility. There is something that is really good about the sexual relationship that ought to show up in marriage that he has captured in those labels. But I think that we think that as we get older we get more mature. We get connected and used to each other, so we do not need that anymore. But Carder has figured out, from listening to people who have lived their lives in such a way that they go after those things outside their marriage, that maybe we do. Even though the affair was wrong, the factors that the unfaithful spouse were going after is a picture of the ideal sexual relationship in marriage. I am sure that what Carder says here is not easily attainable. But it is something to be working on and seeking.

How does Carder define childhood magic? He defines it as "freedom from responsibility and the schedules that so easily consume you at home. It encourages the two of you to come and go when you want, to eat and drink what you like, to get up when you want, to stay up all night if you wish, and to simply indulge yourself in whatever your little hearts desire, to have relaxation and fun." That is really challenging to do. But that should show up in our marriage relationships from time to time. The schedules should not always define who we are. Outside responsibility should not always define who we are. Our sexual relationship should not always be in our day-timer. That is not always a bad thing, but if it is always there then there is a lot of life that is seeping out of the sexual relationship. We put it in the calendar: Friday at 8 o'clock. I will be there, as though it were an appointment. That is not a bad thing. There is some priority setting to that. But it is missing this childhood irresponsibility component that is part of a healthy, active, vital, married relationship expressed in the sexual relationship.

What does Carder mean by adolescent sexuality? "Adolescent sexuality is chaotic, unplanned, spontaneous, and oblivious to the circumstance. It is lustful, passionate, and totally caught up in the moment. Can you imagine you and your spouse spicing up your sex life like this? Some surveys indicate that better than 90 percent of couples involved in an affair report having sexual activity in their cars." Think about that for a moment. It is kind of bizarre, is it not? You are going to have an affair, and the car is a good enough place? But what Carter is implying is that it is even more interesting and attractive. There is so much passion that they cannot wait to rent a room or whatever the other option might be. I am not saying that the measure is location. But is there passion in our married sexual relationship that at times just bubbles up? Does it just happen? It may happen on the living room floor even though the kids are coming home in five minutes. We take the risk because we are not thinking about the risk as much as we are thinking, "I want you." Should that not be present in our marriages? One of the reasons Carder says that certain people can be so attractive to us is that they are passionate and reckless. We have gotten into this very safe, stable, and organized relationship in our marriages with no recklessness in it at all. Then somebody comes along who is reckless, and it is very powerful because there is something in all of us that wants to experience passion. I think Carder helps us to remember that.

How does he define adult mobility? I find this to be particularly challenging for us. "Adult mobility is the component of traveling together, of meeting at a hotel in your same town just to be with each other for a few hours, taking a weekend break at a classy bed and breakfast, or even just sneaking home

during the day while your kids are still in school. It is going with your spouse on a business trip even if he or she is tied up during most of the day. If you were having an affair and you had an hour and a half for lunch and it took you half an hour to drive each way to see your partner, you would make the drive just to be with each other for the remaining half hour. When was the last time you made that kind of effort to see your spouse?" That is a question that exposes us more than we might like. "Surprise each other. See each other outside the normal times you meet. That is exactly what you might do to see your partner if you were in an affair.

So create some fun and be unexpected with your mate." He has a point there, does he not? Folks who are in this illicit, wrong relationship will go to greater lengths to see that person than most of us do as spouses. Most of us think, "Why would we need to do that?" I understand that. We need to, because there is some life to that. There is some demonstration in that of how much we care for our spouse. So if your spouse calls you up from work, maybe you have a day off or you are not working, and they work 45 minutes away and they say, "Will you meet me for lunch? I do not have much time, but I could drive 15 minutes that way." It may cost you half an hour to drive each way, but would you go? Most of us, if we have been married long enough, have fallen into patterns of responsibility and our normal routines, and we are going to say no. That is especially the case if the call is spontaneous, if it comes at 10:30 and we have to leave in an hour. Do you know what I mean? We are missing the invitation that is coming from our spouse. It is really a question that is asking, "Are you there for me?" Sue Johnson says it always comes back to that same question, and I think she is right. "Are you there for me? Would you make that effort? Am I important enough for you?" I understand you cannot always do that. But for most of us, we never do that. It is not convenient. And convenience wins. It should not. It should not be that way. Desire to be with our spouse should win. It should win every day.

I have mentioned already the couple who had the best marriage I ever saw. In response to the question, "What makes your marriage good?" one of the things they said was, "Well, as near as we can tell, we have never gone more than four or five hours without talking to each other." They had been married for 16 years at that point. The husband had the type of job where, if he was paying attention, he could call his wife and say, "Hi. How are you doing?" Of all the things that they could say to the question of what makes your marriage good, the first or second thing out of their mouths was that they talk to each other. They did not say it this way, but their meaning was that they make it a point to make sure they have little conversations, sometimes bigger ones, every day and throughout the day. Sometimes they have more than one. It is spontaneous. It is not a plan. They just do it.

In the beginning of our relationships we are curious about each other. We care about each other, we want to be together, and we listen to each other. We love that experience and want to keep it going. Even when the honeymoon is over and you have to go back to work and there are other things going on, you found ways to do that. As I was interviewing couples 10 years ago or so, trying to figure out what made their marriages good, over and over again they said that they found ways to do that. Even though their parents divorced and they did not have good models, they found ways to do that. They found special ways that were theirs that they connected on a regular basis. The message they were sending to each other was, "You are so important to me that I do not want to lose connection." That was interesting to me, because I expected that these people were going to tell me that they do well in the areas of sex, parenting, money, and in-laws. But we hardly talked about those things. I am convinced that those are the things that you talk about after you get divorced, because that is what you can see on the surface. You do not see your inability, basically, to keep each other special. But when you raise that point, you realize that sexual issues were not the real issue. Everything was good in the couples I interviewed, because these were people who kept paying attention to each other. They put boundaries in place so that

they had the time to do that. There is something really valuable in what Carder is saying here, it seems to me. I do not want you to miss it.

Help couples build the relationship. Do not be simplistic. Help them build the relationship. It is the everyday connection that is important. When I see couples I give them copies of this type of material on a regular basis. When the issue is sexuality or something else, everyday connection and building the relationship is going to be a very important aspect that will help. Help couples build their friendship. Help them start dating again, especially in that magic five hours sense of having conversation with each other. It is not necessary to go to a movie. Sit down face to face and talk, and not about logistics. Plan ahead on that and find time to talk as part of the date. Even if you go to a movie, make sure you go out for coffee or something afterward, even if it is just to talk about the movie. Have conversation rather than a parallel experience of sitting there in a dark room and watching a movie. This is not the same type of dating as you did before you were married when you were trying to figure out who you would marry. It is spending time together, just the two of you. Have the kids go somewhere. Then you can have your date at home. Have time that is reserved for the two of you, doing something together that you enjoy. It might be going out to eat. It might be movies. It might be going for a drive. It might be lots of different things. Find time to talk as part of your date. Have fun. And never cancel a date. Make it a priority. I think that is crucial. I may be overemphasizing that. You could argue that. Perhaps that is because I am trying to correct what happens a lot of times, which is that we get lackadaisical. We get thinking, "It is my wife. She will understand." Or, "It is my husband. It is all right. We will have next week." And we miss the fact that we are communicating that they are not that important and that we as a couple are not that important, certainly not as important as whatever it was that caused the missed date. That is why I say never cancel a date, not for patient emergencies, parishioner catastrophes, stock market crashes, car break downs, or your own tiredness. If there is something important, work around it. Make other people wait, not your spouse. Find someone to replace you for the emergency or maybe your spouse will find someone to replace you for the date. That is a little joke. Resign from the committee if it can only meet during your date time. Nothing should be allowed to get in the way. Some of this is drawn from *Secrets of Eve*.

I think that most of us know this, but it does not stay in place. Who do I think might be the worst in this? I cannot say for sure, but my suspicion is that it might be pastors. After all, they are doing God's work. Do we not have a list of priorities that starts with God? Because we are doing God's work, our families often lose in the process.

By the way, it is helpful to think of priorities, not in terms of a list, but as though they are a pie that is divided into pieces. The circumstance is really what determines which piece of the pie you should focus on the most at a given moment. But even if you are focusing on one piece, the other pieces still have weight.

That makes me think of an illustration I heard from Dick Keyes in a talk he gave a long time ago. It stuck out in my mind. He said that prayer is not always the priority. His example was about doing the dishes. Imagine it is your turn to do the dishes and your spouse reminds you of that, but you say, "You know what, I have not prayed today, and that is my priority." That would be wrong. But having a list can lead us to think in those terms. So help people recognize that. A big, big piece of the pie is our marriage relationship. For those who are pastors, a big piece of your ministry needs to be your marriage relationship. It is not as direct a part of your ministry. But people are watching, and people are being influenced indirectly. It is a big piece of your ministry. Huge things will be lost in your ministry if that is not strong and good.

To help couples build their relationship, help husbands lead in the relationship. It will not be hard when you are working with couples to have a wife agree with you on this point. But that may not be a good thing. It is probably not a good thing. Help the men recognize that they need to be helpful here. They need to be intentional here. They need to be clear that this really is the top priority.

Let me address some questions. If a couple is struggling with infertility, sex gets wound up in that and makes it difficult. How do you deal with that? Try to help them separate the two things. I think that is a great example of how most ways forward in helping people are going to be discovered by listening well and trying to ask questions about what they are saying. You certainly come in with some ideas. One thought I have about a situation like this is try to figure out a way that will make it harder for the couple to think, "Maybe this is the time." Actually, my thought is, try to get the couple to have sex more often. If it will not be clear whether she is pregnant until her period is supposed to come, try to have lots of sex between now and then so that it is not so clear. Separate, as much as possible, the sexual experience from that purpose. Procreation is a right purpose for sex, but it is not the only purpose. This is very hard, but that would be my first thought. I think you would get additional thoughts as you asked questions.

How do you address a situation where there is very little or even no sex in the marriage? Perhaps it has always been like that. But suppose that the wife desires that it would change. What can be done? I would wonder about the four things we talked about earlier. Is there anything going on physically? If the man has not been to the doctor, I would be suspicious. Why not? What is going on? Are there any psychological issues? One way that sex can get distorted is by growing up in a home where the parents, typically, are very negative about sexual things in a very legalistic environment. That can be very constraining. Sometimes kids will react the other way and become very promiscuous. But sometimes they take that on and absorb these attitudes about sex being a bad thing. Sex becomes too dirty to pursue.

There can be other sources of psychological components. It sounds in this case like there needs to be lots of conversation. Something is broken. I suspect there would be some physical issues. It is not normal. Certainly there are ranges for what would be normal levels of sexual desire and frequency. There is a range. I cannot tell you that every couple should be having sex a certain number of times. But I can tell you that if you are measuring the frequency by the month or by the year, that is not enough. It does not have to be per day, but it should not be longer than a week between each encounter. If you are measuring per month, it is not enough. There is certainly a range, but this scenario is not in the normal range. So something is broken. Something is off or distorted. It is probably more than one thing. I would want them to talk to their doctor. There could be hormone issues or lots of other issues. Just because someone says, "It is not homosexuality," does not mean that there might not be some struggles in that area, as well. The physical issues may be contributing to that. There is probably lots of anxiety and lots of fear, though they or you might not know why. You have to be listening for that.

Ambivalence is usually a result of sexual abuse. Ambivalence can happen for other reasons as well. I do not want you to conclude that someone has been abused because they are ambivalent. But when there is abuse, assume ambivalence, simply because almost everyone who is sexually abused is physically normal. So there was some element of pleasure involved, unless it was very violent.

How prevalent is sexual abuse? For women under the age of 18, one in four is abused. For men under the age of 18, it is one in six. So 25 percent of women and about 17 percent of men have been sexually abused. For those of you who are pastors, if you have 200 women in your church, you can expect that 50 of them have been sexually abused. The numbers will usually be fairly close to that. So for all of us who

go to church, if there are 200 women there, we can expect that there are 50 women who have been abused. When you sit down next to a woman in church, there is a good chance you are sitting next to someone who has been sexually abused. Now, this is referring to abuse at some level. That is not to say that one in four women has had intercourse. But they have been sexually abused as it is defined. Most people, and most pastors, do not know that, assume that, or even believe that. Many people who have been sexually abused will not show any signs of it.

Dan Allender, in the book I mentioned earlier, describes three suggested relational styles that are ways of self-protection. People live and relate to others in a certain way to keep things under control and to be safe. So, for example, Allender talks about tough girls who hold people off. They do not get close to people who might find out the truth. You can also have good girls. These are girls who are driven by shame, so they try to prove to themselves and to others that they are really good. And then there are others who have just given up hope and have become party girls. Eat, drink, and be merry is their motto. They already feel so damaged that they do not see any difference. Part of the reason this is so helpful is that as a pastor it can be really nice to have a lot of good girls in your church. They teach Sunday school classes, run Bible schools, get actively involved, and do a million different things. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that everyone who is active and good has been sexually abused. I am not saying that. But some people who have been sexually abused resist the shame and the damage from that by being very diligent, almost compulsively. They work hard and produce good things. Good girls find grace a tough concept. Grace is tough because they really like the “works” mentality. That is their way of coping. But it is easy to miss. This person who seems to be doing very well and is so wonderful really may have something back in their closet that is very devastating. That could be why we might miss it. There are a lot of women in our churches who could potentially be wrestling with past sexual abuse.

Is this true for men as well? Yes. Allender wrote 15 or more years ago when abuse was more common for women, but it is clear in his writing that this can affect men, too. I am suspicious that the numbers may be closer together these days than they were back then. New numbers keep coming out this way. I am not sure men are as open about it, but I hear more and more stories of men who have been sexually abused.

Is sexual abuse increasing as time goes on? It does not appear to be. I first heard these same numbers in 1985, which was more than 20 years ago. There was a book written at that time called *One in Four*. I was in a seminar with the author, and she said that she thought the number would change to one in three. She said she thought they were going to have to change the title of the book. But I keep seeing those same numbers, one in four and one in six. But remember that this is what we know. This is what gets reported. I do not know if we can ever really know what the accurate numbers are. Do I think it is higher? I do not know that it is higher. I do think that it is more intense. 20 years ago there was probably less intercourse for the 25 percent of women who were abused. I think it involves more intercourse now. I hear about greater intensity with guys, too. There used to be less anal intercourse or extreme kinds of abuse, it seems to me. So I think it is more intense. But that is a guess.

Are there variations in the numbers according to race or social status? I do not have those numbers. I think there are differences. But it is better to think that the differences are not as big as we think. There is more white middle class abuse than we think. I am almost afraid of those numbers. We almost think it is more about poverty or being an African American, or something like that. But that is not true. I am not saying it does not happen there. It may be greater there. But white folks have a tendency to think that they are all right. But it is not true.

I want to talk about the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test. This is a simple tool that you can use. It has been around for almost 50 years. It has been tested and retested. It is valid and reliable. Those are two different things, by the way. It tells the truth, and it consistently tells the truth. It has 15 questions that a couple goes through. The test does not take very long. The responses are weighted. Some questions are more important than others and get greater scores. You can tally the scores at the end. It is scaled like an intelligence quotient (IQ) test. The average is 100, and the standard deviation is 15. So 68 percent of the scores will fall between the range of 85 and 115. Almost 7 out of 10 people will fall in that range. Another standard deviation extends the range to between 70 percent and 130.96 percent of couples who will fall in that range. Only 4 percent of people will be outside of that range. So if someone tests below 85, pay attention. If they are on the high side, pay attention as well.

The other thing I would say is do the test with each spouse and pay attention if their scores are quite different. This actually happened to me one time. One spouse had a 108 and the other person had an 85. I did not know what to do with that, but I was interested. They were in my research study that I was doing for my dissertation. I was doing two interviews with these couples. They handed me the tests, I went and scored them, and then I came back. The second interview was bizarre. The wife did not say anything. She was the one who scored 85. I wondered what was going on. He actually looked at her at one point and said, "You are not very talkative." Just being an outside person it was easy to tell that something was going on. I ended up not including those data in my study because about three weeks later she kicked him out and they are now divorced. I do not know what was happening. These were people I knew a little bit. At the first interview it felt like this was the best they had ever been. I do not know what happened between the two interviews. But the test picked it up. So it is helpful, too. It is an accurate tool. It will help you have conversation with people about how their marriage is going. It can help people who feel like they are doing awful to take the test, because they can see that they are not really too bad. They can see that they have some good signs.

Think of the scoring like an IQ test. You probably have a feel for an IQ test. When I was growing up years ago we had a class that was a "special class," and you qualified by having an 85 or under IQ. They used to call that the EMR (educationally mentally retarded) class. They have new labels these days. Think of this that way. An 85 IQ is getting down into problematic levels. An 85 is not a good IQ for your marriage. That couple I mentioned earlier who had the best marriage I have ever seen scored a 134 and a 128, or something like that. To me, that just says that the test works. It has been redone and tested for validity and reliability. It can be helpful. Do not use it as Gospel. But it is a good screening device. It can be a good tool for conversation.