

The Solid Foundation

by

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Premarital Counseling

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Introduction

We live in an age of increasing secularism and disconnection within marriage. The Church has been dramatically affected by this shift in modern culture as it has, to a very large extent, been influenced by the ideas driving that culture. Families struggle. Couples fight to understand how to make their marriages work. In this self-paced premarital course, I have sought to offer a collection of insights, based largely upon the work of Les, & Leslie Parrott in their wonderful book, “*Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts.*”

While there is no insurance company that I am aware of sells a product to fireproof your marriage, marriages that last do so because they are built to last. Marriage is hard work but the reward personally and for your spouse is unmatched. In the following curriculum I offer biblically based tools to assist in the preparation candidates for marriage. There are three steps in your premarital counseling with me. *First*, you need a copy of the basis of this course, “Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts” by Parrott & Parrott. The course is based largely upon that book so you’ll need two copies or you will need to read one together or take turns!

Second, go through the PowerPoint course presentation one session at a time, using the course notes that correspond to that session. Don’t worry, each session is dense, but not lengthy and there are only 8 of them. The couple should do this together. Read the introduction in the course notes, view the presentation, and discuss the questions offered for reflection and have any other conversation that may arise from the notes. *Finally*, after you have viewed and discussed the presentation and the course notes, make an appointment with me to discuss what you reflected on together.

Pastor Chris

Facing the Myths of Marriage

Session - 1

“Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:13 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. Have you considered what marriage will mean to you?
2. Have you discussed together what marriage will mean to you as a couple?

Lecture Material:

All of us bring preconceptions and ideas about what marriage will bring into our lives. For some people, this means that they believe that their marriage will be exactly what they saw modeled in front of them as children. For a few this means that they expect to have the healthy and blissful marriage of their parents. For others this belief fills them with tremendous fear and they were children who witnessed fighting, unhappiness, and even divorce. If we are to have realistic expectations of marriage we must gain a clear picture of what our hopes, dreams, and fears of marriage are and then honestly prepare for the reality of marriage.

Marriage brings with it tremendous challenges which must be faced in a straightforward manner if we are to build healthy and successful marriages. In every marriage there are unspoken rules about what constitutes appropriate interaction and behavior in the marriage. Couples who learn to recognize, properly shape, and live within the boundaries which are acceptable to one another are more likely to avoid little problems turning into much larger problems down the road. (Parrott & Parrot, p.23)

Couples also enter into marriage with many unconscious thought processes which dramatically affect the way we view marriage in general, our partners, and even ourselves. It is often the case that couples develop unconscious roles which they seek to fill in the marriage. Though these roles are unconscious, they often play major parts in the health or lack of health of a marriage. It is important that we learn to make our roles conscious rather than unconscious. In so doing we are then able to effectively communicate our expectations with one another.

Marriage brings with it a unique set of challenges and joys. It is important that we come into marriage in full recognition that marriage is not a “cure all” or an immediate fix to all of our personal, social, or economic problems and pressures. While marriage does have the potential to make many things better in our life, it will make many things more complicated and challenging as we add new pressures and responsibilities to our life.

Everything bad will not disappear in your life once you are married, though many things will improve. We need to have a balanced view between optimism in what marriage will and will not bring in our lives. While in a very real sense our spouses complete us as a God given divine reality in regard to family, our spouses are not responsible for our spiritual wellbeing or to complete us as whole people. Christ alone completes us. When He is at the center of our being and marriage then we are able to interact as completed people.

Each partner brings in different expectations of marriage will be like and each partner brings in different gifts and talents which will contribute to the building of a healthy and successful marriage. Learning to identify our own myths and preconceptions can aide us in developing a healthy strategy for building such a successful marriage!

Identifying Your Love Style

Session - 2

“Let all that you do be done with love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. How do you currently define love?
2. How do you feel about your partner’s definition of love?

Lecture Material:

Love is an often used and seldom understood word. For some love is purely representative of a feeling. For others love is more about physical intimacy and sexual activity. A biblical view of love is both of these things and much more. As we enter into marriage it is crucial that we gain a clear picture of love as a holistic reality in our lives. Love does involve physical intimacy and feelings of passion and excitement but if that is all that love means to us then we will miss out on all of the beauty that God has intended in giving this precious gift to each one of us.

According to Parrot & Parrot (2006) love is best defined as a three part “triangular” model. Passion is the biological side of love. Intimacy is the emotional side of love. Commitment is the cognitive side of love. It is imperative that each of us learns our own love style. Are we more likely to be a passionate person to the exclusion of intimacy? Are we more likely to be deeply committed and not very passionate? Are we committed and passionate but have difficulty in expressing our emotions – therefore limited the depth of our true intimacy in marriage?

Love tends to grow in the following stages; romance as we are attracted to one another, power struggle as we define the roles in our relationship, cooperation as we move past our own preferences and are more willing to change, mutuality as we begin to feel at one with one another, and finally co-creativity as we begin to experience the harmony of life together. This is a life-long process of growth and re-growth as we travel through the seasons of life together. If we are to celebrate a life of fulfilling marriage together we must learn to cultivate passion, intimacy, and commitment in our relationship.

The Habit of Happiness

Session - 3

“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.” (Romans 14:22 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. How would you define happiness?
2. Do you have a habit of happiness?

Lecture Material:

Life is filled with ups and downs for all people – including those who are married. The key to living in a happy marriage is to be happy. In other words, the happiness that exists in our marriages will only be present to the extent that we bring happiness in the door of our homes with us. Negative thinking mars the possibility of our happiness at every turn. If we are to live in happy marriages then we must learn to program our minds toward happy attitudes and joyful thoughts. We must learn not to blame one another for struggles in this life. Blame is the greatest of all thieves’ of happiness.

Indeed this life throws many things at us which are absolutely out of our control. If we are to live happy lives then we will only do so to the extent that we avoid the three serial killers of happiness in marriage; self-pity which destroys happiness and robs couples of their joy, blame which hurts one another and causes deep and lasting wounds, and resentment which is the result of self-pity and blame as the seeds which have been planted turn into the bitterness of resentment. Developing the habit of happiness individually is the key to enjoying long term happiness as a couple.

Communication

Session - 4

“Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works!” (Psalms 105:2 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. Do you think that you are a good listener?
2. Do you think that your future spouse is a good listener?

Lecture Material:

Communication involves much more than simply stringing together words in sentences and paragraphs. Communication is the art of transferring ideas from one person to another in an understandable and discernable manner. Effective communication is essential to building strong marriages. More often than not, poor communication is the source of tension in marriage.

“Communication is the lifeblood of marriage. Having difficulties with communication does not bode well for marital satisfaction.” (Parrot & Parrot, p.79)

In regard to the communication process Parrott & Parrot point out four primary things to avoid in communication. Placating is the behavior of someone who will say anything simply to keep the peace. These are “yes” men or women. Placaters need to learn that it is alright to disagree. Blaming is the act of providing a good offense as a line of defense. Blamers are critical of their partners in every situation. Computing is the behavior of the super reasonable partner who is afraid to show emotion. Distracting is the behavior of the person who resorts to irrelevancies under stress in an effort to shift the conversation away from dealing with difficulties.

The bedrock of successful communication has much more to do with qualities that are brought to bear on the communication process than on what is necessarily spoken or the specific words that are chosen. Successful communication has more to do with the qualities which effectively communicate that you care for your partner. These qualities are warmth, genuineness, and caring. We all fail to say just the right word at times but it is not just the right word or collection of words which make the difference in the end – it is the compassionate communication process that communicates our love most effectively.

Parrott & Parrott give five basic rules for successful communication which, when followed, provide a very good framework for truly successful communication. The use of “I” statements helps to avoid sounding as though your blaming and not willing to change yourself. The practice of reflective listening is to genuinely listen and then act on what is heard. Reflective listeners do not rush to solve problems for their spouse, but to understand the problem completely.

Understanding that men and women are different can help a couple to avoid many rough spots in the communication process. Men are problem solvers while women are more likely to share feelings. It is crucial that partners apologize when necessary. None of us are perfect and a legitimate “I” centered apology which acknowledges one’s responsibility for their own behavior goes a long way in facilitating forgiveness and personal growth. It is important that a couple regularly communicate through touch. Physical contact communicates vast amounts to one another through intimate and loving contact.

The Gender Gap

Session - 5

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:27 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. What do you think are the primary differences between men and women?
2. Is it truly possible to build a bridge across the gender gap?

Lecture Material:

In the Bible we are told that God created men and women with significant differences. “He created them men and woman.” (Genesis 1:27) Men and woman are supposed to be different and when these differences are cherished and understood they unlock the key each partner’s ability to support and uplift the other partner in ways that only our differences allow. When these differences are ignored or suppressed, problems in marriage will inevitably arise. It is a mistake to assume that our partners are just like us. Men and women have different needs; this can not be overlooked if truly healthy and successful marriages are to be built.

Every husband needs to know that his wife has a need to be cherished, known, and respected. These are her fundamental and foundational needs in the marriage. Every wife needs to know that her husband needs to be admired, he needs to have a measure of autonomy, and he needs shared activity with his wife. These basic needs and differences can be meshed together into a fulfilling experience of marriage for both partners but it requires a high measure of intentionality if it is to be accomplished in our marriages.

Fighting a Good Fight

Session - 6

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:27 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. Is conflict ever a good thing in marriage?
2. When conflict arises are you prepared to disagree in a constructive manner?

Lecture Material:

Conflict and disagreement are inevitable and to a certain extent healthy in marriage. The key to successfully navigating conflict in marriage is to be equipped with the tools necessary to fight in a constructive manner. When fights deteriorate into the realm of name calling and hurtful words and actions, the potential for growth through conflict is all but lost. When it comes to conflict there are at least four major areas which are to be avoided; criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

As opposed to hurtful fighting which degenerates into name calling and mudslinging, there are techniques that aide couples in arguing productively through conflict and rough spots that will unavoidably arise from time to time in marriage. To fight the good fight couples should not run from strife but face it directly, they should choose their battles carefully and avoid petty conflict, they should define the issues clearly to avoid fighting for the sake of fighting, couples should share their feelings directly, we should rate the intensity of our feelings, give up hurtful put-downs, and we should avoid dwelling on all of the problems at once.

Conflict is unavoidable in marriage. Happy and successful marriages are not those who never have conflict but are the marriages where conflict does not degenerate into hurtful activity, blaming, and name calling. Success in marriage depends largely on a couples ability or inability effectively manage – not avoid – conflict.

Soul Mates

Session - 7

“And my soul shall be joyful in the LORD; It shall rejoice in His salvation.” (Psalms 35:9 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. What does it mean to be soul mates?
2. What does it mean to have spiritual intimacy?

Lecture Material:

God has created us as innately spiritual beings. The institution of Marriage is the primary means of God’s perfect design for the family structure, where children are best nourished are raised in the admonition of the Lord. At the very center of any godly society is the family. Marriage has the potential to be much more though than merely a social entity for the raising of family and the stabilization society. Marriage can and should be a place of spiritual fulfillment. In marriage we see the picture of spiritual wholeness declared – even if it is difficult to realize. God can indeed be found in your marriage!

Marriage reveals God’s faithfulness in as much as we seek His guidance and strength to able to provide faithfulness to our spouses. “Yes, faithfulness is essential to the survival of our marriages. Think about it. How can we, weak and limited persons that we are, look all the uncertainty of life full in the face and say, ‘I will make one thing certain: my faithfulness to my partner’? We can’t, at least not on our own.” (Parrott & Parrott, p.143) As finite people we need God’s faithfulness to enable us toward faithful living with one another.

Marriage also reveals God's forgiveness. Who among us is without the desperate need for God's forgiveness in our relationship to our spouse? We fail to live up to our obligations and hopes for our spouses at every turn! The struggles of this life, the distractions, and the burdens of family life – career – school all take a toll on our already limited ability to properly love our spouses. We need the forgiveness of God to be ever present and manifest in our marriages.

“Forgiveness lies at the heart of marriage. Two people living together, day after day, stumbling over each other's beings, are bound to cause pain, sometimes innocently, sometimes not.”

(Parrott & Parrott, p.145)

In order to build a strong marriage we need to exercise three essential soul-building activities in our marriages; worship, service, and prayer. Becoming soul mates takes time and intentional spiritual work. As a couple, we must learn not simply to gaze into each other's eyes, but to look in the same direction with the same purpose and goal in mind. We must learn to see each other as God sees us and learn to forgive and pray for one another as God enables us to do so.

Biblical Foundations

Session - 8

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV)

Beginning discussion questions:

1. What is the best place to turn for marital advice?
2. What is the best place to turn for advice in godly living?

Lecture Material:

In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus said, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” (NKJV)

The words of Christ are the only and surest foundation for marriage. When we sail through this life with no regard for the words of Christ we are like ships sailing with no ruder. The word of God is our surest tool for navigating the often turbulent waters of marriage and family life. The Bible is a sure source for help in the trials of this life. When we apply the forgiveness and guidance of the Bible to our lives and marriages, we are sure to find that we are not alone in all that we do. Christ is always available to comfort and direct us as we build lasting marriages.

In this modern era many homes are crumbling as they place a wide array of things at the center of family life other than Christ. Career, activities, success in this world, entertainment, or any number of other things serve to distract us from what ought to be central to our experience of marriage and family – Christ. We must learn to make Christ and His love the center of our family experience. As we do that, we will learn and grow in our cooperation and effort as teammates in a partnership of lifting up Christ in our homes and lives!

References

Les, & Leslie Parrott. (2006). *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Zondervan. (Original work published 1995)