HIDDEN GIFTS
MINISTRY

God's Playbook *to a* *Successful Marriage*

God's Grace for Marriage
in the Unique Calling of Special-Needs Families

A Film Series Participant Workbook



Finding the Hidden Gifts in Your Marriage

God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage

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God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage
A Participant Workbook



Welcome Dear Friend,

Welcome to God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage.

Before you begin this journey, we would like to introduce ourselves and share why this workbook is so important to us.

We are Matt and Glori Nuessle. We have been married for more than 33 years and have spent over 25 years helping couples build stronger marriages. During that time, we have had the privilege of counseling more than 1,000 couples and walking alongside families facing many different challenges.

But the reason we wrote this workbook is not simply because we have counseled marriages.

We wrote it because we have lived this life.

We are the parents of a 25-year-old son, Cody, who has autism.

For more than two decades, our family has navigated the challenges, uncertainties, joys, disappointments, victories, and heartaches that accompany special-needs life. We have sat in therapy rooms, attended countless meetings, advocated for our son, worried about his future, adjusted expectations, celebrated small victories, and learned to trust God through seasons we never would have chosen.

Along the way, we discovered something that many special-needs families know all too well:

The demands of caregiving do not pause so that a marriage can be nurtured.

The needs are constant.

The responsibilities are significant.

The future often feels uncertain.

And if a husband and wife are not intentional, they can slowly become partners in managing life while losing connection with one another.

We understand that reality because we have lived it.

Many marriage resources offer valuable principles, but few are written by people who have spent years walking in the shoes of special-needs families. Too often, couples in our community feel unseen, misunderstood, or forgotten.

This workbook was written for you.

It was written for the couple who loves each other but feels exhausted.

It was written for the husband and wife who spend most of their time caring for others and very little time caring for their marriage.

It was written for the couple who believes their relationship matters and wants to strengthen it before the pressures of life slowly pull them apart.

Marriage is challenging enough on its own.

Add the unique demands of raising or caring for a loved one with special needs, and those challenges can multiply dramatically.

For years, we have heard statistics suggesting that special-needs families experience significantly higher rates of marital distress and divorce. Whether every statistic is perfectly accurate is not the point.

The reality is that far too many marriages are struggling.

We believe that is unacceptable.

We believe marriages are worth fighting for.

We believe strong marriages create stronger families.

And we believe God has given us a blueprint for building marriages that thrive rather than merely survive.

That conviction is what inspired God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage.

Our goal is not to fix your marriage.

Only God can transform hearts.

Our goal is to place practical tools into your hands and point you back to the timeless truths found in God's Word.

We want to help you strengthen your spiritual connection, deepen your emotional intimacy, improve your communication, and rediscover the partnership God intended from the beginning.

Most importantly, we want to help you move toward oneness.

From the opening pages of Scripture, God's design for marriage has always been that a husband and wife become one flesh. That kind of oneness is not built in a single day. It is built through thousands of small choices--choices to love, forgive, serve, listen, sacrifice, encourage, and persevere.

Whether your marriage is flourishing or struggling, we want you to know there is hope.

God is still at work.

Growth is still possible.

And God's design for marriage still works.

Thank you for allowing us to walk alongside you on this journey.

It is our prayer that this workbook will strengthen your marriage, encourage your hearts, and help you discover the hidden gifts God has placed within your story.

In Christ's Love,

Matt and Glori

Hidden Gifts Ministry

How to Use This Workbook



Welcome to God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage.

This workbook was designed to accompany the seven-film marriage series and help you move beyond simply watching content to actually applying biblical principles in your marriage.

The goal is not merely to gain information.

The goal is transformation.

Through each film, we encourage you to slow down, reflect, discuss, and intentionally apply what you are learning.

Recommended Process



1. WATCH ONE FILM AT A TIME

Each film builds upon the previous one.

Resist the temptation to rush through multiple sessions at once.

Take time to absorb the material and discuss it together before moving on.

2. COMPLETE THE WORKBOOK SECTIONS

Each film includes workbook material designed to reinforce the key biblical principles being taught.

Read through the content together.

Highlight important insights.

Make notes as God speaks to you through the material.

3. ANSWER THE REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The reflection questions are designed to move the conversation from theory to application.

Be honest.

Be open.

Be willing to listen.

The greatest growth often occurs through meaningful conversation.

4. COMPLETE THE ACTION STEPS

Knowledge alone does not change a marriage.

Application does.

Each session includes practical action steps designed to help you put biblical principles into practice.

Do not skip these assignments.

They are often where the greatest growth occurs.

5. PRAY TOGETHER

Healthy marriages grow when couples intentionally invite God into their relationship.

Before discussing difficult topics, spend time praying together.

Ask God for wisdom, humility, understanding, and a teachable spirit.

6. GIVE ONE ANOTHER GRACE

No marriage is perfect.

This workbook is not designed to expose failures.

It is designed to encourage growth.

Avoid criticism, defensiveness, or keeping score.

Focus on progress rather than perfection.

Remember that both of you are learning, growing, and allowing God to strengthen your marriage.

A SPECIAL WORD TO SPECIAL-NEEDS FAMILIES

If you are raising a child with disabilities, autism, medical complexities, or other unique needs, you understand that marriage often faces additional pressures.

Caregiving responsibilities, exhaustion, financial stress, appointments, therapies, and uncertainty can place enormous strain on a relationship.

Throughout this workbook, we will intentionally address marriage through the lens of special-needs family life.

Our prayer is that you will discover that God is present not only in the challenges but also in the hidden gifts that can emerge through the journey.

You are not alone.

God sees your family, understands your struggles, and desires to strengthen your marriage.

OUR PRAYER FOR YOU

Our prayer is that this workbook will help you build a marriage that reflects God's design, experiences deeper connection, and becomes a testimony of His grace.

As you invest in your relationship, may you grow spiritually, emotionally, and physically closer to one another and to Christ.

Remember:

Great marriages do not happen by accident.

They are built intentionally, one choice at a time.

The Marriage Trichotomy
God's Design for a Balanced Marriage



A thriving marriage is built when the spiritual, soulful, and physical dimensions of the relationship are intentionally nurtured and brought into balance.

The foundation of this workbook is that marriage is not one-dimensional.

Many couples focus on one area while neglecting the others.

God designed marriage to function as a unified relationship consisting of three interconnected dimensions:

SPIRITUAL

Our relationship with God.

This dimension includes our faith, prayer life, dependence upon Christ, biblical truth, worship, and spiritual purpose.

A spiritually healthy marriage places God at the center of the relationship.

SOULFUL

Our emotional and relational life.

This dimension includes communication, emotional needs, friendship, trust, conflict resolution, affection, encouragement, and emotional intimacy.

This is where most couples either connect deeply or slowly drift apart.

PHYSICAL

Our physical expression of love and intimacy.

This dimension includes affection, touch, sexual intimacy, acts of service, physical presence, and caring for one another's practical needs.

God created physical intimacy as an important expression of marital oneness.

BALANCED MARRIAGE

When these three dimensions work together, couples experience the kind of marriage God intended.

When one area is neglected, imbalance occurs.

A couple may be physically connected but emotionally distant.

They may be emotionally connected but spiritually disconnected.

Or they may share spiritual beliefs while neglecting emotional intimacy.

Healthy marriages intentionally invest in all three dimensions.



Introduction

Every successful marriage begins with understanding God's design. Before we can learn communication skills, emotional needs, conflict resolution, or intimacy, we must first understand what marriage was created to be.

The Bible presents a complete picture of marriage. It begins with God's original design in Genesis, reveals the damage caused by the Fall, provides God's antidote through Christ, offers practical instruction for difficult seasons, and shows us how to live out a Christ-centered marriage every day.

This first part begins where Scripture begins: with God's original design for marriage in Genesis 2. Before sin entered the world, before conflict, shame, blame, or selfishness distorted the relationship between husband and wife, God gave us a picture of marriage as companionship, completion, covenant, and oneness.

Part One:
God's Original Design for Marriage



1. GOD SAID IT WAS NOT GOOD FOR MAN TO BE ALONE

Genesis 2:18 (ESV)

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'"

In Genesis 1, God repeatedly looked at His creation and declared it good. But in Genesis 2, for the first time, God said something was not good. It was not good for man to be alone.

Adam was surrounded by creation. He had meaningful work, a beautiful garden, and direct fellowship with God. Yet God still declared that something was missing. Adam was alone in a way that no animal, no task, and no achievement could fully answer.

God's solution was marriage. He did not simply give Adam an assistant. He gave him Eve: one who would come alongside him, correspond to him, strengthen him, and complete what was lacking.

2. A HELPER FIT FOR HIM: THE COMPLETER

The word helper can sound small in our modern ears, as though Eve was created to be less important or secondary. But that is not the biblical meaning. In Scripture, helper is often used of God Himself, the One who comes to strengthen, rescue, support, and supply what is needed.

Eve was not created beneath Adam, nor was she created as a duplicate of Adam. She was created as his completer. She supplied what he did not have by himself, and he supplied what she would need as well. Together, they reflected the image of God in a way neither was meant to do alone.

This is one of the first truths of marriage: husband and wife are not competitors. They are not independent individuals trying to win their own way. They are designed by God to complement, strengthen, and complete one another.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Marriage is God's gift of companionship, completion, and covenant oneness.

3. GOD DESIGNED MARRIAGE FOR ONENESS

Genesis 2:24 (ESV)

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

Genesis 2:24 gives us the foundational statement for marriage. A man leaves his father and mother, holds fast to his wife, and the two become one flesh.

This is more than living in the same house. This is more than legal status. This is a covenant union of two lives becoming one life together. God's design for marriage is oneness: spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical oneness.

Marriage was never intended to be two separate people living parallel lives under the same roof. God's design is that husband and wife move toward one another, belong to one another, and build a shared life together under His authority.

4. THE ORIGINAL MARRIAGE BEFORE THE FALL

Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve lived without shame, hiding, blame, manipulation, fear, or self-protection. Their relationship was marked by openness and trust.

Genesis 2:25 says that the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. That sentence is about far more than physical nakedness. It reveals a relationship where nothing was hidden, nothing was weaponized, and nothing stood between them.

This was God's original design: a husband and wife walking with God and with one another in trust, unity, vulnerability, and love.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Where do you see God's design for companionship in your marriage?

2. In what ways does your spouse complement or strengthen areas where you are different?

3. Where do you sense God inviting you and your spouse to move toward greater oneness?

4. What would it look like this week to stop competing and start completing one another?

KEY TAKEAWAY

God's original design for marriage is not isolation, competition, or selfish independence. It is companionship, completion, covenant, and oneness.

Part Two:
The Fall and its Impact on Marriage



GENESIS 3

God's design for marriage was perfect. Adam and Eve lived in complete harmony with God and with one another. There was no shame, fear, manipulation, selfishness, conflict, or emotional distance.

Then sin entered the world.

Genesis 3 records the tragic turning point that affected every human relationship, including marriage.

When Adam and Eve chose independence from God, the consequences were immediate.

Their relationship with God was damaged.

Their relationship with each other was damaged.

The unity they had enjoyed began to fracture.

What entered the garden that day still affects marriages today.

The Results of the Fall

1. SHAME REPLACED OPENNESS

Genesis 3:7

"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."

Before sin, Adam and Eve experienced complete openness and acceptance.

After sin, they felt exposed and vulnerable.

Shame causes people to hide.

Instead of moving toward one another, husbands and wives often begin protecting themselves from one another.

2. FEAR REPLACED TRUST

Genesis 3:10

"I was afraid..."

Fear entered the human experience.

Fear causes us to build walls.

Fear makes us defensive.

Fear causes us to protect ourselves rather than trust God and one another.

Many marital conflicts are rooted in fear rather than the issue being discussed.

3. BLAME REPLACED RESPONSIBILITY

Genesis 3:12

"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

Adam blamed Eve.

Eve blamed the serpent.

No one accepted responsibility.

One of the most destructive patterns in marriage is the tendency to focus on our spouse's failures while minimizing our own.

Healthy marriages are built when both husband and wife accept responsibility for their attitudes, actions, and responses.

4. SELFISHNESS REPLACED SERVANTHOOD

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony.

After the Fall, self-interest became the natural tendency of the human heart.

Marriage problems often begin when two people focus more on what they are receiving than on what they are giving.

Sin turns our attention inward.

God's design calls us outward.

5. THE CURSE AND MARRIAGE

Genesis 3:16–19 reveals that the Fall would affect the relationship between husbands and wives.

Conflict, struggle, domination, passivity, frustration, and brokenness became part of the human experience.

This was never God's design.

These are the consequences of sin.

The good news is that God did not abandon humanity in the garden.

Even as judgment was pronounced, God began revealing His plan of redemption.

The rest of Scripture tells the story of God's rescue plan for broken people and broken relationships.

KEY PRINCIPLE

The greatest threat to marriage is not incompatibility.

It is selfishness.

The problem is not God's design.

The problem is our fallen nature.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which effect of the Fall do you see most often in your marriage: shame, fear, blame, or selfishness?

2. When conflict occurs, are you more likely to defend yourself or examine your own heart?

3. How has God's grace helped restore areas of brokenness in your relationship?



IF GENESIS 3 REVEALS THE PROBLEM, EPHESIANS 5 REVEALS GOD'S SOLUTION.THROUGH CHRIST, GOD BEGINS RESTORING WHAT WAS LOST IN THE GARDEN.

Part Three:
God's Antidote for Marriage
Ephesians 5: Restoring What the Fall Damaged



After sin entered the world, marriage became vulnerable to self-centeredness, blame, control, and conflict. God did not leave us without hope. In Ephesians 5, He reveals His antidote for marriage—a new way of relating to one another through sacrificial love and mutual service.

Marriage is not restored by demanding our rights. It is restored when both husband and wife choose to reflect the character of Christ.

1. MARRIAGE BEGINS WITH MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)
"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

This verse serves as the doorway into everything that follows. Too often, discussions about marriage begin with the roles of husbands and wives, but Paul begins with a call to mutual submission.

Biblical submission is not about superiority and inferiority. It is about willingly placing the needs of another person ahead of our own. It is the attitude of Christ Himself, who came not to be served but to serve.

In God's design, both husband and wife are called to submit to one another. The husband submits by sacrificially loving, serving, protecting, and cherishing his wife. The wife submits by respecting, supporting, encouraging, and partnering with her husband.

Paul is not describing a power struggle. He is describing two people who are continually asking, "How can I serve my spouse and help them flourish?"

2. GOD THEN DEFINES THE ROLES

The husband is called to submit to Christ by loving his wife as Christ loved the Church—sacrificially, faithfully, and unconditionally.

The wife is called to submit to Christ by respecting and supporting her husband as his covenant partner.

3. LOVE AND RESPECT: GOD'S SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS

Ephesians 5:33 (ESV)
"However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

Notice that these instructions are gender specific. Husbands are commanded to love their wives, and wives are commanded to respect their husbands.

Wives, ask your husbands: "How can I best show you respect?"

Husbands, ask your wives: "How can I best show you love?"

The goal is not to assume. The goal is to ask, listen, learn, and respond.

4. A CLARIFICATION ON BIBLICAL ROLES

Throughout this workbook, we will occasionally use the terms Life Protector for the husband and Life Giver for the wife. These terms do not replace the biblical concepts of leadership and submission found in Ephesians 5. Rather, they help us understand those concepts in practical, relational terms.

Life Protector and Life Giver are not new roles; they are practical descriptions that help us understand how biblical leadership and submission are expressed in a healthy, Christ-centered marriage.

5. THE HUSBAND: LIFE PROTECTOR OF THE HOME

Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)
"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Biblical leadership is not about power. It is about responsibility.

6. THE WIFE: LIFE GIVER OF THE HOME

God designed wives with a unique ability to nurture, encourage, and bring life into the family relationship.

7. MARRIAGE AS A LIVING PICTURE OF THE GOSPEL

The ultimate purpose of marriage is not simply personal happiness. Marriage was designed to reveal God's love to the world.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The antidote to the selfishness introduced in Genesis 3 is the sacrificial love and mutual submission modeled by Jesus Christ in Ephesians 5.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Where do you most need to practice Christlike, sacrificial love and mutual submission in your marriage right now?

ACTION STEP

This week, have a conversation using the two questions from Ephesians 5:33 and intentionally practice what you learn.

Part Four:
When Marriage Gets Difficult
God's Instructions for Difficult Seasons
1 Peter 3:1-7



Every marriage experiences difficult seasons.

There are times when communication breaks down, expectations go unmet, wounds occur, and frustration grows. During those moments, our natural tendency is often to focus on what our spouse needs to change.

Yet Peter's instructions in 1 Peter 3 direct our attention somewhere else. Rather than focusing on changing our spouse, God calls us to focus on our own obedience.

God's commands do not disappear when marriage becomes difficult. In fact, it is often during the most challenging seasons that obedience becomes most important.

1. OBEDIENCE BEFORE RESULTS

Peter addresses both husbands and wives living in less-than-perfect circumstances. His focus is not on controlling another person's behavior but on honoring God through our own.

Biblical marriage is built on obedience, not circumstances.

We obey God's instructions because they are right, not because our spouse has earned it.

This principle protects us from allowing our spouse's behavior to determine our own faithfulness.

2. A COMMAND TO HUSBANDS

1 Peter 3:7 (ESV)
"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."

The phrase "live with your wives in an understanding way" is not a suggestion. It is a command.

God calls husbands to become students of their wives.

Understanding requires curiosity.

Understanding requires listening.

Understanding requires asking questions.

Understanding requires setting aside assumptions.

Too often husbands think they understand their wives without actually taking time to listen to them.

Peter's command requires something deeper.

3. BECOMING A STUDENT OF YOUR WIFE

A practical application of this verse is for every husband to ask his wife:

"How can I live with you in an understanding way?"

Then listen carefully.

Do not defend.

Do not explain.

Do not argue.

Listen.

Your wife is the expert on how she feels understood.

Her answer may reveal needs, frustrations, fears, desires, or wounds that you never realized existed.

Understanding begins when assumptions end.

4. A SERIOUS WARNING

Peter attaches a remarkable warning to this command:

"...so that your prayers may not be hindered." — **1 Peter 3:7 (ESV)**

God takes this command seriously.

Peter teaches that a husband's relationship with God can be affected by how he treats his wife.

This does not mean a husband loses his salvation. Rather, it means that fellowship with God can be disrupted when he refuses to honor, understand, and care for his wife as God commands.

Few warnings in Scripture regarding marriage are stronger than this one.

God is saying, in effect:

"How you treat your wife matters to Me."

5. A COMMAND TO WIVES

Peter also instructs wives to cultivate a spirit of godly strength, trust, and respect.

Rather than placing their hope in outward appearance or circumstances, wives are called to place their confidence in God and allow their character to reflect His beauty.

This does not imply weakness. It demonstrates strength under God's control.

Just as husbands are called to sacrificial understanding, wives are called to godly influence rooted in trust and respect.

6. THE BIGGER PICTURE

Both Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 point to the same truth:

God's design for marriage requires intentionality.

Love must be practiced.

Respect must be practiced.

Understanding must be practiced.

Honor must be practiced.

Healthy marriages are not built by accident. They are built when husbands and wives repeatedly choose obedience to God's design, even during difficult seasons.

KEY TAKEAWAY

When marriage becomes difficult, God calls us to focus less on changing our spouse and more on faithfully obeying His instructions.

REFLECTION QUESTION

What would your spouse say if you asked, "How can I better understand and honor you?"

ACTION STEP

This week, set aside thirty uninterrupted minutes together.

Husbands, ask:

"How can I live with you in an understanding way?"

Wives, answer honestly and specifically.

Then switch roles and ask:

"What is one thing I could do that would help you feel more loved, respected, and understood?"

Listen without defending, correcting, or explaining.

Simply seek to understand.

Part Five:
How to Become One
The Mind of Christ in Marriage
Philippians 2:1-11



Throughout this first film, we explored God's design for marriage, the damage caused by the Fall, God's antidote through mutual submission, and His instructions for navigating difficult seasons.

The natural question becomes:

How do we actually do this?

How do two imperfect people become one?

How do husbands love sacrificially?

How do wives respect and support their husbands?

How do couples practice understanding, honor, forgiveness, and grace?

Paul answers these questions in Philippians 2.

1. BE OF ONE MIND

Philippians 2:2 (ESV)
"Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

This instruction should immediately remind us of God's original design in Genesis 2.

Marriage was always intended to create oneness.

God declared that the two would become one flesh. Paul now calls believers to become of one mind.

Physical oneness alone does not create marital unity.

True unity develops when a husband and wife learn to think together, pursue common goals, share common values, and seek God's purposes together.

The goal is not that one spouse wins and the other loses.

The goal is that both move toward God's design together.

2. HOW DO WE BECOME ONE MIND?

Philippians 2:3-4 (ESV)
"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

The greatest enemy of oneness is selfishness.

The greatest builder of oneness is humility.

Most marital conflict begins when two people focus primarily on their own needs, desires, preferences, and expectations.

Paul teaches a radically different approach.

Instead of asking:

"How do I get my needs met?"

We begin asking:

"How can I help meet my spouse's needs?"

Instead of demanding our own way, we intentionally consider the interests of the other person.

This does not mean neglecting ourselves. It means refusing to place ourselves at the center of the relationship.

Biblical marriage thrives when both spouses seek the good of the other.

3. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Philippians 2:5 (ESV)
"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."

Jesus demonstrated perfectly what humility looks like.

Although He was fully God, He willingly laid aside His rights and privileges.

Paul writes:

"He emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant." — **Philippians 2:7 (ESV)**

Jesus chose service over self-interest.

He chose humility over position.

He chose sacrifice over comfort.

4. THE CROSS: THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF MARRIAGE

Philippians 2:8 (ESV)
"He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

The cross represents the ultimate expression of sacrificial love.

Jesus willingly gave Himself for the benefit of others.

This becomes the model for Christian marriage.

A husband fulfills his role by following the example of Christ's sacrificial love.

A wife fulfills her role by following the example of Christ's humility and servant-heartedness.

Both spouses are called to imitate Jesus.

Marriage flourishes when two people continually ask:

"What would it look like for me to serve my spouse the way Christ served me?"

5. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

Every passage we have studied in Film 1 points to the same truth.

Genesis 2 teaches oneness.

Genesis 3 reveals the problem of selfishness.

Ephesians 5 teaches mutual submission, love, and respect.

1 Peter 3 teaches understanding and honor.

Philippians 2 shows us how to live all of it.

The pathway to marital oneness is humility.

The pathway to humility is following the example of Christ.

When husbands and wives put the interests of one another ahead of their own, they create the environment where love, respect, understanding, and intimacy can flourish.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Marital oneness is achieved when two people continually choose the mind of Christ—placing the interests of one another ahead of their own through humility, service, and sacrificial love.

REFLECTION QUESTION

What would change in your marriage if both you and your spouse consistently asked, "How can I serve you today?"

ACTION STEP

This week, each spouse should ask:

"What is one thing I can do this week that would make your life easier, lighten your load, or help you feel loved and supported?"

Then intentionally do it.

As you practice putting the interests of your spouse before your own, notice how it affects your connection, communication, and unity.



Film Purpose

Most couples enter marriage believing its primary purpose is happiness. But God's design is far deeper. Marriage was created to lead a husband and wife toward oneness. In this session, we will discover why happiness alone cannot sustain a marriage, why our spouse cannot meet our deepest needs, and how security and significance found in Christ free us to pursue genuine intimacy and lasting oneness.

Part One: The Three Great Misunderstandings About Marriage



MISUNDERSTANDING #1: MARRIAGE EXISTS FOR HAPPINESS

Genesis 2:18 (ESV)

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'"

Happiness is not a bad thing. God delights in blessing His children, and healthy marriages often produce tremendous joy. The problem is that happiness is an emotion largely dependent upon circumstances. When circumstances are favorable, happiness rises. When circumstances become difficult, happiness often declines.

If happiness is the foundation of marriage, then the foundation moves every time life changes. God never intended marriage to rest on something as unstable as changing circumstances. A marriage built primarily on happiness will always struggle because happiness was never intended to be the foundation.

MISUNDERSTANDING #2: MY SPOUSE EXISTS TO MEET MY DEEPEST NEEDS

Many couples unknowingly enter marriage believing, "If my spouse loves me enough, I will finally feel complete." This expectation places a burden on a spouse that no human being was designed to carry. No husband can be God. No wife can be God.

When we expect our spouse to provide ultimate fulfillment, we ask them to do something only Christ can do. Marriage becomes frustrating when we expect from our spouse what only God can provide.

MISUNDERSTANDING #3: MY CIRCUMSTANCES ARE THE CAUSE OF MY MARRIAGE PROBLEMS

While upbringing, personality, finances, and life experiences influence us, Scripture teaches that our deepest problem is something greater. Sin entered the world. Sin entered relationships. Sin entered marriage. The Fall did not destroy God's design for marriage, but it distorted it.

Part Two:
God's Real Purpose for Marriage: Oneness



From the beginning God declared, "The two shall become one flesh." God's purpose for marriage is oneness.

This oneness includes:

- Spiritual Oneness
- Soulful Oneness
- Physical Oneness

Part Three:
The Road to Oneness is Intimacy



The pathway to oneness is intimacy.

Let's break down that word: Into-Me-You-See

Intimacy occurs when we allow another person to see who we really are. Our fears, disappointments, dreams, failures, and hopes. Oneness requires vulnerability, emotional risk, and trust.

Part Four: Security



Every human heart longs for security.

- Security cannot be earned.
- Security cannot be lost.
- Security is rooted in unconditional love.

Only God can provide that kind of security.

Romans 8:28-39 teaches that nothing can separate us from the love of God. The fact is that every believer is secure in Christ, whether we feel secure or not.

Our spouse cannot make us secure. But our spouse can walk beside us and remind us of the truth that we are secure.

Part Five: Significance



Every human being longs for significance. We want our lives to matter and have eternal value.

True significance comes from participating in God's purposes. How we treat our spouse matters. How we love our children matters. How we serve our families matters.

For special-needs families, significance is often found in countless unseen acts of faithfulness, sacrifice, patience, and love.

Part Six:
The Cliff of Intimacy



In Larry Crabb's book, *The Marriage Builder*, he illustrates a woman standing on the edge of a cliff. Below her is the abyss of rejection. The fear is that if she steps off the cliff and reveals herself completely, she will be rejected and fall. She imagines herself falling and going splat. But the rope is connected to God, so she will never fall splat, because she has the security of God holding the rope.

Most people never fully risk intimacy. As a result, they never fully experience oneness.

Part Seven:
The Bungee Cord of God's Security



Imagine a bungee cord attached to God Himself.

God asks us to move toward intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional risk. Our emotions tell us we are about to go splat. But we won't, because our security is attached to God.

Years ago, my son went bungee jumping. When he stepped onto the platform, he jumped immediately. Later he explained, "If I didn't jump right away, I wasn't going to jump."

He said that the second and third bounces felt even worse because his stomach was in his throat, but the cord held.

That is what God asks us to do in marriage. Take the emotional risk. Move toward intimacy. Move toward vulnerability. Move toward oneness.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Marriage was never designed to be built on happiness.

Your spouse cannot meet needs, only God can meet.

Intimacy requires emotional risk.

Security comes from Christ.

Significance comes from living for eternal purposes.

God's security allows us to risk intimacy.

FILM TWO CLOSING PRINCIPLE

When our security and significance are rooted in Christ, we are free to risk intimacy. Then, intimacy becomes the pathway to the oneness God intended from the very beginning.

Session 2 Workbook, Discussion Guide & Takeaways
What Marriage Is Really For

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we discovered that God's purpose for marriage is not merely happiness but oneness. We explored three common misunderstandings about marriage, learned that intimacy is the pathway to oneness, and discovered that true security and significance can only be found in Christ. Because we are secure in Him, we are free to take the emotional risks necessary for intimacy and lasting connection.

KEY SCRIPTURES

Genesis 2:24

Romans 8:38-39

Ephesians 4:15

John 15:5

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE

1. Before this session, what did you believe was the primary purpose of marriage?

2. Which of the three misunderstandings do you see affecting your marriage most often?

3. How can the pursuit of happiness actually become an obstacle to oneness?

UNDERSTANDING INTIMACY

4. What does "Into-Me-You-See" mean to you personally?

5. What makes vulnerability difficult for you?

6. What emotional risks have you avoided in your marriage?

UNDERSTANDING SECURITY

7. What are some ways you have looked to your spouse for security instead of Christ?

8. How does Romans 8 strengthen your confidence in God's love?

9. How can you help your spouse remember the truth that they are secure in Christ?

UNDERSTANDING SIGNIFICANCE

10. Where do you most often seek significance?

11. How has caring for your family shaped your understanding of eternal significance?

12. What investments are you making today that will matter in eternity?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I feel most secure when...

I feel most insecure when...

One area where I need to trust God's security more is...

One emotional risk God may be asking me to take is...

COUPLE EXERCISE #1 – THE SECURITY CONVERSATION

Husband:

"I feel most loved and secure when..."

Wife:

"I feel most loved and secure when..."

After both spouses answer, discuss:

- What surprised you?
- What did you learn about each other?
- How can you better encourage one another this week?

COUPLE EXERCISE #2 – THE SIGNIFICANCE CONVERSATION

What is one thing you hope people will say about your life when you are gone?

What do you hope your children remember most about your marriage?

What kind of legacy are we building together?

SPECIAL-NEEDS FAMILY APPLICATION

Families impacted by disability often experience seasons that feel overwhelming.

- Therapies.
- Medical appointments.
- Financial pressures.
- Behavioral challenges.
- Exhaustion.
- Isolation.
- Faithfulness matters.
- Patience matters.
- Perseverance matters.

The simple act of loving your spouse and child well during difficult seasons has eternal significance.

REFLECTION:

Where have you seen God's purpose at work through your family's challenges?

TAKE-HOME CHALLENGE

This week, intentionally take one emotional risk with your spouse.

- ☐ A fear
- ☐ A dream
- ☐ A disappointment
- ☐ A struggle
- ☐ A hope

PRACTICE: INTO-ME-YOU-SEE

SESSION 2 TAKEAWAYS SHEET

Key Truth #1 – Marriage Was Never Designed To Be Built On Happiness

Key Truth #2 – My Spouse Cannot Meet Needs Only God Can Meet

Key Truth #3 – The Road To Oneness Is Intimacy

Key Truth #4 – Security Is Found In Christ

Key Truth #5 – Significance Comes From Living For Eternal Purposes

Key Truth #6 – Emotional Risk Is Necessary For Intimacy

THE BUNGEE CORD PRINCIPLE

Imagine standing on the edge of a cliff.

- Below is the fear of rejection.
- Below is the fear of failure.
- Below is the fear of going splat.

But God's security is like a bungee cord attached to us.

Our emotions may tell us we are falling.

Our emotions may tell us disaster is coming.

But God's promises hold.

Because our security is in Christ, we are free to risk intimacy.

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

Choose one emotional risk to take with your spouse.

- ☐ A fear
- ☐ A dream
- ☐ A disappointment
- ☐ A struggle
- ☐ A hope

MEMORY PRINCIPLE

Because my security and significance are found in Christ, I am free to risk intimacy and pursue oneness with my spouse.

PRAYER

Lord, help me find my security and significance in You alone. Give me the courage to be vulnerable with my spouse and the wisdom to pursue the oneness You designed for our marriage. Amen.



Film Purpose

In our previous session, we discovered that God's purpose for marriage is oneness. We learned that intimacy is the pathway to that oneness and that true security and significance can only be found in Christ.

But if intimacy is so important, why is it often so difficult?

The answer lies within what Larry Crabb calls the soulful dimension of marriage.

Every day we make a choice.

We can move toward our spouse in ministry.

Or we can move toward our spouse in manipulation.

Most couples do not consciously choose manipulation. In fact, many loving husbands and wives manipulate without even realizing they are doing it.

The difference between manipulation and ministry may be one of the most important discoveries a couple ever makes.

Part One: The Soul Is the Battleground of Marriage



The soul is where our thoughts, emotions, desires, fears, motivations, and choices reside. While spiritual oneness connects us to God and physical oneness connects us physically, the soul is where intimacy either grows or dies.

Every conflict, disappointment, misunderstanding, and unmet expectation passes through the soul. The greatest battles in marriage are rarely external. The battle is not primarily against our spouse. The battle is within ourselves.

Part Two: Two Ways of Relating to Your Spouse



Larry Crabb identifies two fundamentally different ways we can approach marriage: manipulation or ministry.

Every interaction with our spouse moves in one of these two directions.

Part Three: What Is Manipulation?



Manipulation is helping my spouse become everything I want them to be.

Manipulation attempts to control outcomes, force growth, and change people. It often appears loving on the outside but is frequently driven by fear, insecurity, frustration, or self-interest.

Part Four: What Is Ministry?



Ministry is helping my spouse become everything God created them to be.

Marriage becomes one of the greatest ministries God will ever entrust to us. We have the privilege of helping our spouse become the husband, wife, parent, disciple, servant, and person God created them to be.

Part Five: Why We Manipulate



Manipulation feels safer. It gives the illusion of control. When we feel afraid, insecure, or overwhelmed, manipulation becomes tempting or even just as a natural behavior. Yet, the more we attempt to control another person, the less intimacy survives.

Part Six: Three Common Tools of Manipulation



Demands - Withdrawal - Guilt

Manipulation seeks control. Ministry seeks connection.

Part Seven: The Special-Needs Family Challenge



Stress does not create manipulation. Stress exposes it.

Special-needs families often live under extraordinary pressure. The solution is not trying harder but continually returning to Christ and allowing His grace to flow through us toward our spouse.

Part Eight: The Danger of Trying to Change Your Spouse



Only God changes people.

When we take responsibility for changing our spouse, we assume a role God never assigned to us.

Manipulation always damages intimacy.

Part Nine: What Ministry Looks Like



Ministry speaks truth, encourages growth, establishes healthy boundaries, and trusts God with the outcome.

Manipulation trusts control.

Ministry trusts God.

Part Ten: Using Your Spouse or Serving Your Spouse



At the deepest level, every marriage moves in one of two directions.

We either use our spouse.

Or we serve our spouse.

Serving asks: "How can I contribute to what God is doing in your life?"

Part Eleven: Jesus: The Ultimate Example



Jesus never manipulated people. He loved them, served them, corrected them, challenged them, and trusted God with the outcome.

Marriage ministry follows the same pattern.

Part Twelve:
The Hidden Gifts Perspective



Healthy marriages refuse to keep score.

Instead they ask:

"How can I serve my spouse well today?"

Part Thirteen:
Becoming a Safe Place



A safe spouse creates room for growth.

A controlling spouse creates fear.

When our spouse feels safe, intimacy grows.

When intimacy grows, trust grows.

When trust grows, oneness grows.

Part Fourteen: The Daily Choice



Every day we choose.

Manipulation or ministry.

Control or trust.

Fear or faith.

Every step toward ministry becomes a step toward intimacy.

FILM THREE CLOSING PRINCIPLE

Manipulation asks:

"What can I do to change my spouse?"

Ministry asks:

"How can I help my spouse become everything God created them to be?"

Healthy marriages are not built through manipulation.

Healthy marriages are built through ministry.

FILM 3 – SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Mark 10:42–45 — Servant Leadership

Philippians 2:3–4 — Putting Others First

Luke 6:45 — Heart Behind Words

James 4:1–3 — Source of Conflict

Ephesians 4:15 — Truth in Love

Ephesians 4:29 — Building Up with Words

Colossians 3:12–14 — Compassion and Grace

1 Peter 4:8 — Love Covers Offenses

1 Thessalonians 5:11 — Encourage One Another

Proverbs 16:24 — Healing Words

Psalm 62:5–8 — Hope in God

John 15:5 — Dependence on Christ

Galatians 6:2 — Bearing Burdens

Romans 12:10 — Honor One Another

Session 3 – Workbook, Discussion Guide & Takeaways
The Soulful Dimension – Manipulation vs. Ministry

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we explored the soulful dimension of marriage and discovered the critical difference between manipulation and ministry.

Manipulation seeks to control a spouse and make them become what we want them to be.

Ministry seeks to help a spouse become everything God created them to be.

We learned that demands, withdrawal, and guilt are common tools of manipulation, while service, encouragement, grace, and trust are marks of ministry.

Ultimately, healthy marriages are built when spouses stop trying to change one another and begin helping one another grow in Christ.

KEY SCRIPTURES

Philippians 2:3-4

Galatians 6:2

Ephesians 4:15

Romans 12:10

John 13:34-35

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MANIPULATION VS. MINISTRY

1. What was the biggest insight you gained from this session?

2. How would you define manipulation in your own words?

3. How would you define ministry in your own words?

4. Which approach do you naturally fall into most often?

- □ Manipulation
- □ Ministry

Why?

THREE COMMON TOOLS OF MANIPULATION

5. Which tool do you tend to use most often?

- □ Demands
- □ Withdrawal
- □ Guilt

Why do you think this has become your default response?

6. How has this pattern affected intimacy in your marriage?

USING OR SERVING

7. What is the difference between using a spouse and serving a spouse?

8. Have there been times when you viewed your spouse primarily through what they could provide for you?

9. How would your marriage change if both spouses consistently asked:

"How can I serve my spouse well today?"

SPECIAL-NEEDS FAMILY DISCUSSION

10. What pressures create the most stress in your family?

11. How does stress affect the way you relate to one another?

12. What would ministry look like during your most difficult seasons?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I feel stressed, I usually respond by:

The manipulation tool I use most often is:

One area where I try to control my spouse is:

One way I could minister to my spouse this week is:

COUPLE EXERCISE #1 – MINISTRY INVENTORY

Husband:

One way I feel ministered to by my spouse is:

Wife:

One way I feel ministered to by my spouse is:

DISCUSS:

- **What actions make you feel loved?**
- **What actions make you feel supported?**
- **What actions help you grow spiritually?**

COUPLE EXERCISE #2 – SERVING CONVERSATION

What is one burden I am carrying right now?

How can my spouse help carry that burden?

What is one practical way I can serve my spouse this week?

SPECIAL-NEEDS FAMILY APPLICATION

Special-needs families often experience pressure that most couples never face.

The temptation is to focus on survival.

Yet even in difficult seasons, ministry remains possible.

Sometimes ministry looks like:

- Listening patiently
- Offering encouragement
- Taking over a responsibility
- Providing a break
- Praying together
- Extending grace

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is moving toward one another instead of away from one another.

REFLECTION:

Where is God inviting you to choose ministry over manipulation?

TAKE-HOME CHALLENGE

This week intentionally choose one act of ministry toward your spouse.

Do it:

- ☐ Without being asked
- ☐ Without expecting anything in return
- ☐ Without keeping score

Ideas:

- ☐ Write an encouraging note
- ☐ Pray for your spouse
- ☐ Complete a task for them
- ☐ Listen without fixing
- ☐ Give them a break
- ☐ Ask how you can serve them

SESSION 3 TAKEAWAYS SHEET

KEY TRUTH #1

Manipulation seeks control.

Manipulation focuses on changing another person.

Ministry focuses on loving another person.

KEY TRUTH #2

Ministry helps people become who God created them to be.

We are not called to fix our spouse.

We are called to minister to them.

KEY TRUTH #3

Only God changes people.

Real transformation is God's work.

Our responsibility is faithfulness.

KEY TRUTH #4

Healthy marriages serve rather than use.

The question is not:

"What can my spouse do for me?"

The question is:

"How can I bless my spouse?"

KEY TRUTH #5

Safety creates intimacy.

People flourish where grace, encouragement, and trust exist.

KEY TRUTH #6

Every day we choose.

Manipulation or ministry.

Control or trust.

Fear or faith.

The choice is made daily.

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

My act of ministry this week will be:

MEMORY PRINCIPLE

Healthy marriages are not built through manipulation.

Healthy marriages are built through ministry.

PRAYER

Lord, help me stop trying to control what only You can change.

Teach me to love, serve, encourage, and minister to my spouse.

Give me the grace to help them become everything You created them to be.

Amen.



Film Purpose

Communication impacts every part of marriage.

Outside of our relationship with God, communication may be the single greatest factor influencing the health of our marriage.

Communication affects:

- Intimacy
- Trust
- Conflict
- Friendship
- Parenting

Every area of our relationship.

Many couples believe their greatest problem is communication.

But communication is often not the real problem.

Communication is usually the symptom of something deeper.

What comes out of our mouths is often a reflection of what is happening in our hearts.

This is why communication cannot be separated from spirituality.

It cannot be separated from ministry.

It cannot be separated from our relationship with Christ.

Session Two taught us that God's purpose for marriage is oneness, Session Three taught us that ministry creates intimacy while manipulation destroys it, and Session Four teaches us how communication either builds or damages that intimacy.

Healthy communication does not happen accidentally.

Healthy communication requires intentionality.

It requires humility.

It requires understanding.

And most importantly, it requires God's help.

Part One: Communication Is a Ministry



One of the greatest mistakes couples make is viewing communication as simply exchanging information.

Communication is much more than information.

Communication is ministry.

Every conversation becomes an opportunity to minister to our spouse.

Every conversation becomes an opportunity to move toward our spouse or away from our spouse.

Words have tremendous power.

Most of us can remember words that were spoken years ago that still affect us today.

That is because words matter.

Words can heal.

Words can encourage.

Words can strengthen.

Words can comfort.

Words can inspire.

Words can create connection.

But words can also wound.

Words can discourage.

Words can shame.

Words can create distance.

Words can damage trust.

Scripture repeatedly reminds us of the power of our words.

The goal of communication is not merely talking.

The goal of communication is connection.

Communication is not about winning.

Communication is not about proving a point.

Communication is not about getting our way.

Communication is about helping another person feel understood, valued, respected, and loved.

Every conversation either builds intimacy or weakens intimacy.

Every conversation either builds trust or damages trust.

Every conversation either ministers or manipulates.

That is why communication matters so much.

Part Two: The Most Important Step Happens Before We Speak



Larry Crabb offers one of the most practical communication principles I have ever encountered.

Before you open your mouth, pray.

Before you respond, pray.

Before you defend yourself, pray.

Before you send the text, pray.

Before you confront, pray.

Before you correct, pray.

Pray first.

That sounds simple.

But it changes everything.

When we pray, we stop reacting.

When we pray, we invite God into the conversation before the conversation begins.

When we pray, we become honest with God about what is happening inside of us.

Tell God exactly how you feel.

Tell Him what hurt.

Tell Him what frustrated you.

Tell Him what disappointed you.

Tell Him what angered you.

Tell Him what you are afraid of.

God already knows.

Prayer is not informing God.

Prayer is inviting God to shape our hearts.

Many times after praying, we discover that what we were about to say does not need to be said.

Other times, we discover that it does need to be said, or that it needs to be said in a completely different way than we originally intended.

Prayer changes conversations before conversations begin.

Many arguments could be avoided if couples simply paused and prayed first.

Prayer softens our hearts.

Prayer changes our perspective.

Prayer reminds us that our spouse is not the enemy.

Prayer prepares us to minister rather than manipulate.

And that changes everything.

Part Three:
Do I Need to Stuff It or Dump It?



After prayer comes discernment.

One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is this:

Do I need to stuff it?

Or do I need to dump it?

Now before we go any further, let's define what it meant by stuffing and dumping.

By "stuffing it," I do not mean denial.

I do not mean pretending something does not matter.

I do not mean sweeping problems under the rug.

What I mean is this:

There are times when God reveals that the issue is primarily within me.

The irritation is mine.

The pride is mine.

The insecurity is mine.

The selfishness is mine.

The unrealistic expectation is mine.

And God may be saying:

This is something I want to deal with in your heart.

Not every frustration requires a conversation.

Not every disappointment requires confrontation.

Not every annoyance requires discussion.

Sometimes God is doing a deeper work in us than He is in our spouse.

At other times, God may reveal that an issue genuinely needs to be discussed.

The relationship would benefit from honest communication.

The concern is legitimate.

The issue needs attention.

In those moments, the answer is not to stuff it.

The answer is to discuss it lovingly.

Prayer helps us determine the difference.

Prayer gives us discernment.

Prayer helps us understand whether God is addressing our spouse's behavior or our own heart.

Healthy communication begins with wisdom.

Wisdom is knowing the difference.

Part Four: Goals and Desires



One of the most helpful concepts in understanding conflict comes from the book of James.

James asks a simple but penetrating question:

What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Most people answer that question by pointing to another person.

James points somewhere else.

He points to the desires within us.

Most marital conflict begins with a blocked goal.

Something we want is not happening.

Something we expected is not occurring.

Something we desire is not achieved.

This is why it is so important to understand the difference between a goal and a desire.

A goal is something I can accomplish completely on my own.

A desire requires someone else's participation.

That distinction is critical.

For example, it can be a goal to spend time with God each day.

It can be a goal to maintain a positive attitude.

It can be a goal to serve my spouse.

It can be a goal to exercise regularly.

Those things are within my control.

But many things in marriage are desires.

I desire affection.

I desire companionship.

I desire appreciation.

I desire intimacy.

I desire understanding.

Those things involve another person.

The problem occurs when we turn desires into demands.

A desire says:

I would really like this.

A demand says:

I must have this.

A desire remains flexible.

A demand becomes controlling.

A desire invites discussion.

A demand creates conflict.

Healthy couples learn to communicate desires honestly without turning them into demands.

That one distinction can dramatically reduce conflict in a marriage.

Part Five:
The Goal of Communication



Many couples enter conversations with the wrong goal.

The goal becomes winning.

The goal becomes proving a point.

The goal becomes defending ourselves.

The goal becomes convincing our spouse.

The goal becomes being right.

But none of those goals create intimacy.

In fact, most of them damage intimacy.

The goal of communication is understanding.

Understanding does not necessarily mean agreement.

You can understand your spouse and still see things differently.

You can understand your spouse and still reach a different conclusion.

But understanding communicates value.

When people feel understood, they feel respected.

When they feel respected, they feel safer.

When they feel safer, they become more open.

When they become more open, intimacy grows.

This is why healthy communicators ask questions.

They seek clarity.

They remain curious.

They listen carefully.

They want to understand before they want to be understood.

That last statement may be one of the most important communication principles in marriage.

Seek first to understand.

Then seek to be understood.

Most couples reverse the order.

We become so focused on making our point that we stop listening.

But understanding creates connection.

Connection creates intimacy.

Intimacy creates oneness.

Part Six:
Perception Is Not Reality



One of the most important communication lessons a couple can learn is the difference between perception and fact.

Facts are facts.

Perceptions are perceptions.

The problem is that many marital conflicts begin when we present our perceptions as facts.

For example, a spouse may say:

> *You do not care about me.*

That statement feels true to the person saying it.

But is it a fact?

Or is it a perception?

A healthier approach might be:

> *My perception is that you do not care about me right now.*

Notice the difference.

The first statement invites defensiveness.

The second statement invites discussion.

The first statement assumes motive.

The second statement invites understanding.

Every one of us sees life through our own lens.

Our experiences.

Our upbringing.

Our personality.

Our fears.

Our expectations.

Our wounds.

Our perceptions are real.

But that does not automatically make them facts.

This principle applies to both spouses.

My perception is my perception.

Your perception is your perception.

Either one of us may be right.

Either one of us may be wrong.

Or both of us may be seeing part of the truth.

When we communicate perceptions as perceptions, we become more willing to listen.

We become more willing to learn.

We become more willing to compromise.

We become more willing to understand.

Healthy communication often begins with a simple phrase:

My perception is...

That phrase creates space.

It lowers defensiveness.

It invites curiosity.

It keeps the conversation open.

Remember:

The goal of communication is not proving that my perception is correct.

The goal of communication is understanding what my spouse is experiencing.

When understanding becomes the goal, intimacy grows.

And when intimacy grows, oneness becomes possible.

Part Seven: Openers and Closers



One of the most valuable communication lessons a couple can learn is understanding what opens communication and what closes communication.

Every spouse has both.

Every spouse has certain words, attitudes, tones, and responses that help them feel safe.

And every spouse has certain words, attitudes, tones, and responses that immediately shut communication down.

These are what I call openers and closers.

The important thing to understand is this:

Your spouse determines what opens communication for them.

Your spouse determines what closes communication for them.

You do not get to decide.

If your spouse says something that closes communication, then it closes communication.

That becomes reality for them.

This principle alone can transform a marriage.

Many couples spend years arguing about whether their spouse should feel a certain way.

The fact is feelings are real to the person experiencing them.

You may not understand them.

You may not agree with them.

But if you want communication to remain open, you must learn to respect them.

One of the greatest lessons I learned in my own marriage came through this principle.

Glori experiences life through a very emotional lens.

She feels deeply.

She processes life emotionally.

Years ago, when she would share something she was feeling, I would sometimes respond by saying:

You should not feel that way.

My intention was not to hurt her.

I thought I was helping.

I thought I was offering perspective.

What I was actually doing was invalidating her experience.

The conversation immediately shut down.

Communication closed.

The moment I told her she should not feel that way, I had communicated that her feelings were somehow wrong.

When people feel dismissed, they stop sharing.

Over time, I learned a different response.

Now I might say:

I do not understand why you feel that way. Can you help me understand?

Notice the difference.

I am not agreeing.

I am not disagreeing.

I am not validating whether the conclusion is right or wrong.

I am validating the fact that she genuinely feels that way.

I am also inviting understanding.

That simple change keeps communication open.

It creates safety.

It communicates respect.

It then allows the conversation to continue.

This principle applies to every marriage.

Some spouses shut down when voices get louder.

Some shut down when sarcasm appears.

Some shut down when criticism begins.

Some shut down when they feel interrupted.

Some shut down when they feel judged.

The specific closers may differ.

But every spouse has them.

Likewise, every spouse has openers.

Openers communicate safety.

Openers communicate respect.

Openers communicate curiosity.

Openers communicate value.

Openers often sound like:

Help me understand.

Tell me more.

What are you feeling right now?

I want to understand your perspective.

Can you explain that to me?

Those phrases invite connection.

They invite vulnerability.

They invite honesty.

One of the healthiest conversations a couple can have is simply asking:

What helps you feel heard?

What helps you feel understood?

What shuts you down?

What makes you feel safe?

The answers to those questions are incredibly valuable.

Because healthy communication thrives in an environment of safety.

Safety grows when spouses learn each other's openers and closers.

The goal is not to win the conversation.

The goal is to keep the conversation open long enough to understand one another.

When communication stays open, understanding grows.

When understanding grows, trust grows.

When trust grows, intimacy grows.

Intimacy is always moving us toward the oneness God desires for our marriage.

Part Eight: The Relief Valve



Every pressure cooker has a relief valve.

Without it, pressure builds.

The temperature rises.

The pressure increases.

Eventually something explodes.

Marriage is no different.

Every marriage experiences pressure.

Stress from work.

Stress from finances.

Stress from parenting.

Stress from health concerns.

Stress from schedules.

Stress from unmet expectations.

Stress from special-needs caregiving.

Pressure is a normal part of life.

The question is not whether pressure will come.

The question is what we do when it comes.

Many couples continue talking long after communication has stopped being productive.

The volume increases.

The frustration increases.

Defensiveness increases.

Eventually neither spouse is listening anymore.

At that point, continuing the conversation rarely helps.

It usually causes more damage.

This is why every couple needs a relief valve.

Glori and I developed a simple relief valve years ago.

Our phrase is:

Do-over.

That's it.

Two simple words.

When one of us realizes that frustration is rising, emotions are taking over, or the conversation is no longer productive, we simply say:

Do-over.

I cannot fully explain why it works as well as it does.

But it does.

The moment those words are spoken, something changes.

The pressure drops.

The tension eases.

Defensiveness lowers.

Perspective returns.

Instead of continuing down a destructive path, we stop.

We reset.

And then we begin again.

What is interesting is that many times the second conversation sounds completely different from the first.

Sometimes we even find ourselves laughing.

The issue may be exactly the same.

The facts may be exactly the same.

But our hearts are different.

Our attitudes are different.

Our approach is different.

Because the pressure has been released.

Every couple should develop their own relief valve.

Your phrase may not be "do-over."

It might be:

Can we reset?

Let's take a break.

Can we start over?

Or something unique to your marriage.

The phrase itself is not what matters.

What matters is having an agreed-upon way to lower the pressure before damage occurs.

Some couples need five minutes.

Some couples need thirty minutes.

Some couples need an hour.

Some couples need until the next morning.

The timing is less important than the purpose.

The purpose is not avoidance.

The purpose is not withdrawal.

The purpose is not punishment.

The purpose is to regain perspective so that communication can continue in a healthy way.

One caution is important.

A relief valve should always lead back to the conversation.

It should never become a way to escape the conversation.

Healthy couples pause so they can reconnect.

They do not pause so they can avoid.

The goal is always understanding.

The goal is always connection.

The goal is always ministry.

The healthiest marriages are not the marriages with the least pressure.

They are the marriages that have learned how to handle pressure well.

And sometimes that begins with two simple words:

Do-over.

Those two words have saved more conversations in our marriage than I could ever count.

And they may help save some in yours as well.

Part Nine: Becoming a Student of Your Spouse



One of the greatest mistakes couples make is assuming they already know everything about one another.

After all, you have been married for years.

Maybe decades.

You know their favorite restaurant.

You know how they take their coffee.

You know what side of the bed they sleep on.

You know their routines.

You know their habits.

But knowing facts about your spouse is not the same as knowing your spouse.

People change.

Life changes.

Experiences change us.

Success changes us.

Failure changes us.

Parenting changes us.

Special-needs caregiving changes us.

Health challenges change us.

A person sitting across from you today is not exactly the same person you married years ago.

And that is why healthy communication requires curiosity.

Healthy spouses remain students of one another.

Students ask questions.

Students remain curious.

Students keep learning.

Students recognize there is always more to discover.

One of the greatest gifts we can give our spouse is genuine curiosity.

Not interrogation.

Not cross-examination.

Curiosity.

A desire to know them more deeply.

Questions like:

What has been weighing on your heart lately?

What is something you are excited about?

What has been frustrating you?

What are you worried about?

How can I support you better?

What is God teaching you right now?

Those questions communicate interest.

And interest communicates value.

One of the greatest complaints heard in marriage counseling is:

I do not feel heard.

Closely behind it is:

I do not feel understood.

Those statements are often less about communication skills and more about curiosity.

When people stop being curious, they stop learning.

When they stop learning, assumptions take over.

Assumptions are often wrong.

Healthy communication remains curious.

Healthy communication asks questions.

Healthy communication seeks understanding.

The day we think we fully understand our spouse is often the day we stop learning about them.

The strongest marriages are built by people who remain lifelong students of one another.

Part 10
Investing in Conversation



Let me ask a simple question.

Is your marriage worth twenty-nine dollars?

Most couples laugh when I ask that question.

And almost everyone answers yes.

Then, I usually ask another question.

If your marriage is worth twenty-nine dollars, are you willing to invest twenty-nine dollars in it?

One of the most practical communication tools I have found is a simple product called Talking Point for Couples.

It is nothing fancy.

It is simply a box filled with conversation starters.

Hundreds of questions.

Hundreds of opportunities to learn about one another.

Hundreds of opportunities to become a better student of your spouse.

Most couples spend the majority of their communication discussing tasks.

Who is picking up dinner?

Who is taking the car?

What time is the appointment?

Did you pay the bill?

Did you call the doctor?

Who is taking care of this?

Who is taking care of that?

Task communication is necessary.

Life requires task communication.

But task communication alone will never create intimacy.

No couple ever woke up one day deeply connected because they became experts at discussing schedules.

Intimacy grows when we discuss things that matter.

Dreams

Fears

Memories

Values

Goals

Regrets

Experiences

Hopes

Struggles

Faith

Those are the conversations that build connection.

I often encourage couples to pull out a few cards each evening.

Do not rush through them.

Do not answer with yes or no.

Go deeper.

Explore the answer.

Ask follow-up questions.

Be curious.

Listen carefully.

Learn something new about your spouse.

You may be surprised by what you discover.

The goal is not completing the box.

The goal is connection - Have fun with it!

By the time you have worked through all of those questions, you may have invested nearly one hundred hours in meaningful conversation.

Think about that.

One hundred hours intentionally learning about your spouse.

One hundred hours intentionally listening.

One hundred hours intentionally connecting.

That is a tremendous investment in a marriage.

More importantly, you have practiced one of the most important communication skills of all:

Being interested in your spouse.

Healthy communication is not merely talking.

Healthy communication is learning.

Healthy communication is discovering.

Healthy communication is remaining a student of your spouse for the rest of your life.

Part Eleven: Communication in Special-Needs Families



Special-needs families face unique communication challenges.

The pressures are real.

The responsibilities are significant.

The demands are constant.

Doctor appointments.

Therapy schedules.

School meetings.

Financial concerns.

Behavioral challenges.

Future planning.

Caregiver fatigue.

Exhaustion.

There are seasons when simply making it through the week feels like an accomplishment.

And under that kind of pressure, communication often becomes transactional.

The conversation revolves around tasks.

Schedules.

Responsibilities.

Problems to solve.

Crisis management.

And while those conversations are necessary, they can slowly crowd out the deeper conversations that sustain a marriage.

Many special-needs parents become excellent teammates.

But they stop becoming close companions.

They become managers of a household rather than husband and wife.

This is why intentional communication becomes even more important.

The greater the pressure, the greater the need for connection.

The greater the responsibility, the greater the need for understanding.

The greater the stress, the greater the need for grace.

The goal is not perfect communication.

No marriage communicates perfectly.

The goal is intentional communication.

The goal is creating regular opportunities to reconnect.

To listen.

To understand.

To encourage.

To pray.

To laugh.

To remember that before you were caregivers, you were husband and wife.

And that relationship still matters.

Perhaps now more than ever.

Part Twelve: Repairing Conversations



No matter how good our communication becomes, every marriage will experience communication failures.

Every husband.

Every wife.

Every relationship.

At some point, we will say something we should not have said.

At some point, we will misunderstand one another.

At some point, we will become defensive.

At some point, emotions will get the best of us.

At some point, we will hurt the person we love most.

The question is not whether communication failures will happen.

The question is what we do when they happen?

Healthy marriages are not built by people who never make mistakes.

Healthy marriages are built by people who learn how to repair mistakes.

In fact, some of the strongest marriages are not those with the fewest conflicts.

They are the marriages that have learned how to recover from conflict well.

Repair begins with humility.

Humility allows us to admit when we are wrong.

Humility allows us to take responsibility.

Humility allows us to place the relationship above our pride.

One of the most powerful phrases in marriage is:

I was wrong.

Not:

I am sorry you feel that way.

I am sorry, but...

If you had not...

Simply:

I was wrong.

Those three words can accomplish more than a thirty-minute explanation.

Another powerful phrase is:

I am sorry.

A genuine apology communicates that the relationship matters more than winning.

It communicates that connection matters more than being right.

Another powerful phrase is:

Will you forgive me?

Forgiveness is one of God's greatest gifts.

It becomes one of the greatest gifts we can offer our spouse.

Forgiveness does not mean pretending something did not happen.

Forgiveness does not mean excusing wrong behavior.

Forgiveness means choosing not to hold the offense against the other person moving forward.

Marriage cannot survive without forgiveness.

No relationship can.

Because none of us are perfect.

We all need grace.

We all need mercy.

We all need forgiveness.

Another powerful repair phrase is:

Help me understand.

When conflict occurs, our natural tendency is to defend ourselves.

Healthy communication seeks understanding before defense.

Many arguments lose their intensity when one spouse genuinely says:

Help me understand what you are experiencing.

Those five words communicate humility.

They communicate curiosity.

They communicate respect.

They often reopen communication that was beginning to close.

Another phrase that can transform a marriage is:

Can we start over?

Sometimes conversations go off the rails.

Sometimes emotions get ahead of wisdom.

Sometimes frustration takes over.

That does not mean the conversation is lost.

It simply means it needs a fresh start.

This connects directly to the relief valve we discussed earlier with the "do-over".

What we are really saying is:

This conversation is not going where we want it to go.

Let us reset.

Let us try again.

Let us approach this differently.

The willingness to start over is a sign of maturity.

The willingness to repair is a sign of humility.

The willingness to reconnect is a sign of love.

One of the greatest gifts you can give your spouse is becoming a safe person to repair with.

A spouse who admits mistakes.

A spouse who apologizes.

A spouse who forgives.

A spouse who listens.

A spouse who reconnects.

Those qualities build trust.

Trust is the foundation of intimacy.

Part of being a healthy communicator is recognizing that communication is not measured by whether we avoid conflict.

Communication is measured by how we navigate conflict.

Conflict itself is not the enemy.

Unresolved conflict is the enemy.

Conflict handled well often creates deeper understanding.

Deeper understanding creates deeper trust.

Deeper trust creates deeper intimacy.

Deeper intimacy moves us toward the oneness God intended from the beginning.

FILM FOUR CLOSING PRINCIPLE

Healthy couples are not couples who never disagree.

Healthy couples are couples who learn how to reconnect even when they disagree.

Communication becomes powerful when prayer shapes our hearts, ministry shapes our motives, and love shapes our words.

Before you speak, pray.

Before you react, seek understanding.

Before you assume, ask questions.

Before you judge, listen.

Before you defend, consider your spouse's perspective.

When communication breaks down, repair quickly.

The strongest marriages are not built on perfect communication.

They are built on humble communication.

Communication that seeks understanding.

Communication that values connection.

Communication that extends grace.

Communication that reflects Christ.

As husbands and wives, we have the privilege of using our words to build one another up.

To encourage.

To comfort.

To strengthen.

To minister.

When communication becomes ministry, intimacy grows.

When intimacy grows, trust grows.

When trust grows, oneness grows.

This is exactly what God intended for marriage from the very beginning.

FINAL THOUGHT

Every conversation is moving your marriage somewhere.

The question is:

Is it moving you closer together?

Or farther apart?

Choose words that build.

Choose words that heal.

Choose words that invite understanding.

Choose words that minister.

Because communication is not simply talking.

Communication is one of the most powerful ways we love our spouse.

KEY SCRIPTURES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 18:21 (ESV) — Power of Words

Ephesians 4:15 (ESV) — Speaking the Truth in Love

James 1:19 (ESV) — Quick to Hear, Slow to Speak

Psalm 139:23-24 (ESV) — Heart Examination

James 4:1-2 (ESV) — Goals and Desires

Philippians 2:3-4 (ESV) — Seeking Understanding

Proverbs 18:17 (ESV) — Perception vs. Reality

Proverbs 15:1 (ESV) — Openers and Closers

Ecclesiastes 3:7 (ESV) — When to Pause

Proverbs 20:5 (ESV) — Drawing Out the Heart

Galatians 6:2 (ESV) — Bearing Burdens Together

Colossians 3:13 (ESV) — Repair and Forgiveness

Colossians 4:6 (ESV) — Gracious Communication

Session 4 Workbook, Discussion Guide & Takeaways Communication: From Conflict to Connection

SESSION SUMMARY

Communication impacts every area of marriage.

It affects intimacy, trust, friendship, conflict resolution, parenting, and emotional connection.

Many couples believe communication is their greatest problem. In reality, communication is often the symptom of something deeper occurring within the heart.

Healthy communication begins before words are spoken. It begins with prayer, humility, and a desire to minister to our spouse rather than manipulate them.

In this session we learned:

- Communication is ministry.
- Prayer should precede difficult conversations.
- Not every frustration requires confrontation.
- Healthy couples distinguish between goals and desires.
- The goal of communication is understanding.
- Perceptions should be communicated as perceptions, not facts.
- Every spouse has communication openers and closers.
- Every marriage needs a healthy relief valve.
- Healthy spouses remain students of one another.
- Intentional conversation creates intimacy.
- Special-needs families require even greater intentionality in communication.
- Healthy marriages learn how to repair conversations quickly.

KEY SCRIPTURES

Proverbs 18:21 (ESV — Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

James 1:19 (ESV) — Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

James 4:1–2 (ESV) — Understanding the connection between desires and conflict.

Proverbs 18:17 (ESV) — The importance of hearing both sides.

Proverbs 15:1 (ESV) — A soft answer turns away wrath.

Colossians 3:13 (ESV) — The importance of forgiveness.

Colossians 4:6 (ESV) — Gracious communication.

Discussion Questions

1. Which communication principle from this session impacted you the most?

2. Do you tend to pray before responding during conflict or react first?

3. Can you identify a desire that has unintentionally become a demand in your marriage?

4. What is one communication opener that helps you feel heard?

5. What is one communication closer that causes you to shut down?

6. How can you become a better student of your spouse?

7. Which repair phrase would be hardest for you to say?

- ☐ I was wrong.
- ☐ I'm sorry.
- ☐ Will you forgive me?
- ☐ Help me understand.
- ☐ Can we start over?

Why?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

My greatest communication strength:

My greatest communication challenge:

One communication habit I need God's help changing:

COUPLE EXERCISE

Openers and Closers Inventory

One of the most valuable conversations you can have is identifying what helps communication stay open and what causes communication to shut down.

My Communication Openers

What helps me feel heard, understood, and safe?

1.

2.

3.

My Communication Closers

What causes me to shut down, become defensive, or stop listening?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Share your answers with your spouse and discuss ways you can intentionally use more openers and avoid unnecessary closers.

RELIEF VALVE EXERCISE

Every healthy marriage needs a relief valve.

What phrase will we use when communication becomes unproductive?

Our Relief Valve Phrase:

What will this phrase mean?

- ☐ Pause and pray
- ☐ Start over
- ☐ Take a short break
- ☐ Lower the pressure
- ☐ Reconnect later

☐ Other:

How long should our typical pause be?

How will we ensure we return to the conversation?

BECOMING A STUDENT OF YOUR SPOUSE

Set aside 20–30 minutes this week and ask your spouse the following questions:

What has been weighing on your heart lately?

What is something you're excited about right now?

What is something you're concerned about?

How can I support you better?

What is God teaching you in this season?

What did you learn about your spouse?

SPECIAL-NEEDS FAMILY APPLICATION

Special-needs families face unique communication challenges.

The goal is not perfect communication.

The goal is intentional communication.

Discuss the following together:

What communication pressures affect our family the most?

What conversations have we been avoiding?

How can we intentionally reconnect this week?

How can we better bear one another's burdens?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

This week, intentionally practice the principles from Session Four.

Check off each item as you complete it.

- ☐ Pray before every difficult conversation.
- ☐ Use the phrase "My perception is..." at least once.
- ☐ Practice one communication opener.
- ☐ Avoid one communication closer.
- ☐ Use your relief valve if needed.
- ☐ Spend at least 30 minutes in intentional conversation.
- ☐ Ask your spouse at least three curiosity questions.
- ☐ Practice one repair phrase.
- ☐ Pray together at least once this week.

SESSION FOUR KEY TAKEAWAY

Communication is not about winning.

Communication is about understanding.

Understanding creates connection.

Connection creates intimacy.

Intimacy creates oneness.

The strongest marriages are not built on perfect communication.

They are built on humble communication.

Communication that seeks understanding.

Communication that extends grace.

Communication that reflects Christ.

PERSONAL COMMITMENT

The one communication principle I will intentionally practice this week is:

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the gift of marriage.

Help us to communicate in ways that honor You and strengthen our relationship.

Teach us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

Give us wisdom to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

Help us to seek understanding before seeking to be understood.

Give us humility to admit when we are wrong and grace to forgive one another when we are hurt.

Help us become students of one another and faithful ministers to one another.

May our words build up rather than tear down.

May our conversations create connection, intimacy, and oneness.

Most of all, may our marriage reflect the love and character of Jesus Christ.

In His name we pray,

Amen.

SESSION 4 TAKEAWAYS

Communication: From Conflict to Connection

Key Principles to Remember

- ☐ Communication is ministry.
- ☐ Pray before you speak.
- ☐ Not every frustration requires confrontation.
- ☐ Learn the difference between goals and desires.
- ☐ Seek understanding before seeking to be understood.
- ☐ Communicate perceptions as perceptions, not facts.
- ☐ Learn your spouse's communication openers and closers.
- ☐ Develop a healthy relief valve.
- ☐ Remain a lifelong student of your spouse.
- ☐ Invest intentionally in meaningful conversation.
- ☐ Repair conversations quickly.
- ☐ Communication should move your marriage toward intimacy and oneness.

THIS WEEK'S ACTION STEPS

- ☐ Pray before every difficult conversation.
- ☐ Ask God whether you need to "stuff it" or "dump it."
- ☐ Use the phrase "My perception is..." at least once.
- ☐ Practice one communication opener.
- ☐ Avoid one communication closer.
- ☐ Use your relief valve if needed.
- ☐ Spend at least 30 minutes in intentional conversation.
- ☐ Ask your spouse three curiosity questions.
- ☐ Practice one repair phrase.
- ☐ Pray together at least once this week.

MEMORY PRINCIPLE

Communication is not about winning.

Communication is about understanding.

Understanding creates connection.

Connection creates intimacy.

Intimacy creates oneness.

MY PERSONAL APPLICATION

The communication principle that challenged me most:

The communication principle I will intentionally practice this week:

PRAYER FOCUS

Lord, help me use my words to build up rather than tear down.

Teach me to listen carefully, speak graciously, and communicate with humility.

Help me become a better student of my spouse and a faithful minister within my marriage.

May my words reflect the love, grace, and truth of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

SESSION FOUR FINAL THOUGHT

Every conversation is moving your marriage somewhere.

Choose words that build.

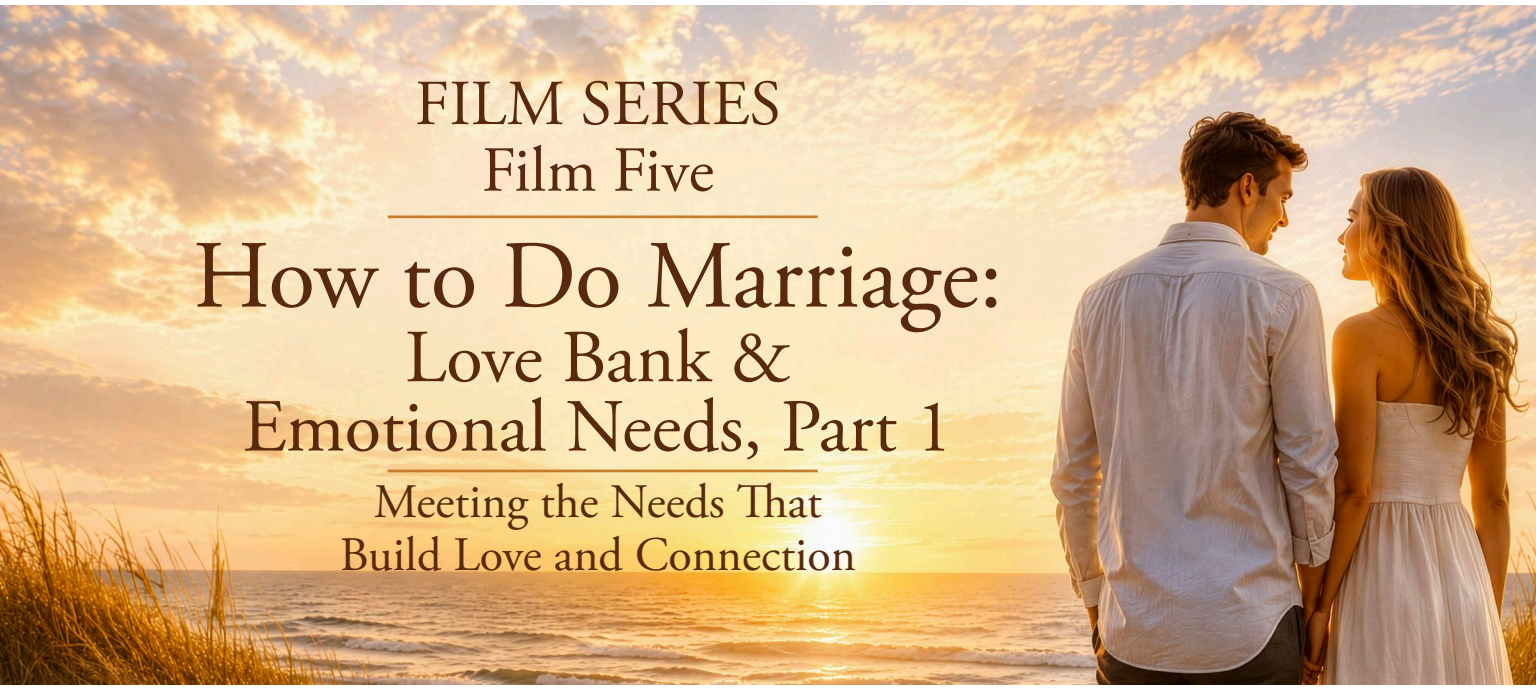
Choose words that heal.

Choose words that invite understanding.

Choose words that minister.

Because communication is not simply talking.

Communication is one of the most powerful ways we love our spouse.



One of the most important discoveries couples make in marriage is that love is not sustained by good intentions alone.

Most husbands and wives begin marriage with deep affection for one another. They are committed to the relationship and genuinely desire a healthy marriage. Yet over time, many couples find themselves feeling disconnected, misunderstood, or emotionally distant.

What happened?

In many cases, the issue is not a lack of love.

The issue is a lack of understanding.

Dr. Willard Harley, author of *His Needs, Her Needs*, introduced a powerful concept called the Love Bank. Imagine that every spouse carries an emotional account within their heart. Positive interactions create deposits. Negative interactions create withdrawals.

A thoughtful act creates a deposit.

A kind word creates a deposit.

Listening well creates a deposit.

Showing appreciation creates a deposit.

Criticism creates a withdrawal.

Neglect creates a withdrawal.

Harsh words create a withdrawal.

Broken promises create a withdrawal.

Over time, the balance in that account determines much of the emotional connection that exists within a marriage.

Couples with healthy marriages consistently make more deposits than withdrawals.

Couples who struggle often experience the opposite.

One of the reasons this concept is so important is that it helps us understand that love is not merely a feeling. Love is built through thousands of small daily choices.

Dr. Harley also teaches that every person has emotional needs.

While every individual is unique, he identified ten basic emotional needs commonly found within marriage relationships.

The challenge is that husbands and wives rarely prioritize those needs in the same order.

What feels deeply meaningful to one spouse may not be nearly as important to the other.

As a result, many couples work hard at loving one another but still miss the target.

They are expressing love in the way they would like to receive it rather than in the way their spouse most needs to receive it.

Over the years, we have discovered a simple principle that can dramatically strengthen a marriage.

If you learn and consistently meet your spouse's top three emotional needs, you are headed toward a good marriage.

If you intentionally go beyond that and learn to meet even more of those needs, you are headed toward a great marriage.

But if you ignore your spouse's top emotional needs, there is a real possibility that emotional distance will begin to grow.

Needs do not disappear simply because they are ignored.

When important emotional needs go unmet, frustration often grows.

Disappointment grows.

Distance grows.

Eventually resentment can take root.

This is why understanding your spouse's emotional needs is one of the most important discoveries you can make.

You do not have to become perfect.

You simply need to become intentional.

For special-needs families, this principle is especially important.

The demands of caregiving can consume enormous amounts of emotional energy. Therapies, appointments, medical concerns, educational decisions, financial pressures, and daily caregiving responsibilities often leave little time or energy for the marriage relationship itself.

Many couples become experts at meeting the needs of their children while unintentionally neglecting one another.

Without intentional effort, marriages can drift into survival mode.

The issue is not a lack of love.

The issue is a lack of intentional investment.

Understanding emotional needs helps us become intentional once again.

In this session, we explored the first four emotional needs identified by Dr. Harley.

The Four Emotional Needs We Explored



EMOTIONAL NEED #1 – AFFECTION

Affection is the emotional expression of love.

Affection communicates warmth, tenderness, appreciation, and care without expecting anything in return. It is often expressed through hugs, kisses, holding hands, thoughtful notes, encouraging words, acts of kindness, and simple expressions of love throughout the day.

Affection communicates a powerful message:

"You matter to me."

For many spouses, affection creates significant deposits in the Love Bank, because it reinforces emotional security and reminds them they are valued and cherished.

EMOTIONAL NEED #2 – INTIMATE CONVERSATION

Intimate conversation is much more than discussing schedules, finances, children, responsibilities, or daily tasks.

It is the sharing of hearts.

Intimate conversation involves discussing hopes, dreams, fears, frustrations, victories, disappointments, and the everyday experiences of life.

Most couples spend significant amounts of time talking while dating, but many gradually lose that connection as life becomes busier.

Healthy marriages intentionally create time for meaningful conversation.

Not merely to exchange information.

But to exchange understanding.

For many spouses, intimate conversation is one of the most powerful Love Bank deposits that can be made.

EMOTIONAL NEED #3 – RECREATIONAL COMPANIONSHIP

Recreational companionship is the enjoyment of life together.

It is sharing activities that both husband and wife genuinely enjoy and look forward to experiencing together.

The activity itself is not what matters most.

The relationship is.

- Walking together.
- Traveling together.
- Playing games together.
- Serving together.
- Exploring hobbies together.
- Laughing together.

Healthy marriages require more than responsibility and commitment.

They require friendship.

Recreational companionship strengthens that friendship and creates lasting memories that deepen emotional connection.

EMOTIONAL NEED #4 – PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Physical appearance is often misunderstood.

This need is not about perfection, comparison, or achieving unrealistic standards.

It is about stewardship and consideration.

Physical appearance communicates that we continue to value ourselves and our relationship enough to present our best selves to one another.

Most couples invest considerable effort into their appearance before marriage. Unfortunately, many stop making those efforts after marriage.

While physical appearance is rarely the most important emotional need, it remains an important part of attraction, connection, and maintaining romantic interest within the marriage relationship.

At its heart, physical appearance communicates:

"You are important to me, and our relationship is worth my continued effort."

As you reflect on these four emotional needs, consider which of them might rank among your spouse's top three needs.

Remember, the goal is not to assume what your spouse needs.

The goal is to discover what matters most to them.

When we learn to meet our spouse's most important emotional needs, we make regular deposits into the Love Bank and strengthen the emotional connection that sustains a healthy and lasting marriage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you most about Dr. Harley's Love Bank concept?

2. As you think about your marriage today, do you believe there have been more deposits or withdrawals recently? Explain.

3. Why do you think emotional needs are often misunderstood in marriage?

4. Dr. Harley identified ten basic emotional needs. Why do you think husbands and wives often prioritize those needs differently?

5. What did you think about the principle that if we consistently meet our spouse's top three emotional needs, we are headed toward a good marriage?

6. Which of the four emotional needs discussed in this session best describes how you naturally receive love?

7. Which of the four emotional needs do you believe is most important to your spouse?

8. What are some practical ways you can make greater Love Bank deposits in your marriage this week?

9. How has raising a child with special needs affected your ability to intentionally invest in your marriage relationship?

10. Which of the four emotional needs do you believe needs the most attention in your marriage right now?

- □ Affection
- □ Intimate Conversation
- □ Recreational Companionship
- □ Physical Attraction

11. What is one thing you learned about your spouse during this discussion?

12. What do you believe may be one of your spouse's top three emotional needs?

ACTION STEPS

□ Schedule one uninterrupted time for intimate conversation this week.

□ Plan one recreational activity that both of you enjoy.

□ Intentionally express affection to your spouse every day this week.

□ Identify one practical way you can better invest in your physical appearance as an act of stewardship and consideration for your spouse.

□ Discuss together what actions create the greatest Love Bank deposits for each of you.

□ Pray together and ask God to help you become more intentional in meeting one another's emotional needs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Love is built through daily deposits and withdrawals.**
- **Every spouse has emotional needs.**
- **Husbands and wives often prioritize emotional needs differently.**
- **Understanding your spouse's needs is more important than assuming them.**
- **If you consistently meet your spouse's top three emotional needs, you are headed toward a good marriage.**
- **If you intentionally meet additional emotional needs, you are headed toward a great marriage.**
- **Ignoring your spouse's most important emotional needs can create emotional distance over time.**
- **Affection communicates love and care.**
- **Intimate conversation builds emotional connection.**
- **Recreational companionship strengthens friendship.**
- **Physical appearance communicates continued care and consideration.**
- **Strong marriages are built intentionally, not accidentally.**

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for creating marriage and for giving us practical ways to strengthen the relationships You have entrusted to us.

Help us to become students of our spouse. Give us wisdom to understand their emotional needs and the willingness to meet those needs with love, patience, and consistency.

Teach us to make more deposits than withdrawals in the Love Bank of our marriage. Help us to communicate affection, enjoy meaningful conversation, build friendship through shared experiences, and demonstrate consideration for one another in every area of life.

Give us the strength and intentionality to continue investing in our marriage even during demanding seasons. Protect our relationships from drifting into survival mode and help us remain connected to one another and to You.

May our marriages reflect Your love, Your grace, and Your faithfulness.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

SCRIPTURE INDEX

Romans 12:10

Philippians 2:3–4

Ephesians 4:29

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Ephesians 5:25

Ephesians 5:33



Building a Marriage That Continues to Grow

In the previous session, we explored Dr. Willard Harley's concept of the Love Bank and examined the first four emotional needs commonly found within marriage: Affection, Intimate Conversation, Recreational Companionship, and Physical Appearance.

We also discussed an important principle: If we learn and consistently meet our spouse's top three emotional needs, we are headed toward a good marriage. If we intentionally learn to meet even more of those needs, we are headed toward a great marriage. If we ignore those needs, emotional distance can begin to grow.

In this session, we will examine the remaining emotional needs and discover how intentional investment can help husbands and wives become increasingly attractive and irresistible to one another.

The goal is not manipulation. The goal is not performance. The goal is not pretending to be someone we are not. The goal is becoming the kind of spouse who consistently demonstrates love in ways that are meaningful to the person we married.

EMOTIONAL NEED #5 – DOMESTIC SUPPORT

Domestic support refers to creating a home environment that is organized, functional, peaceful, and supportive.

This need is often misunderstood because it is not primarily about housekeeping. It is about partnership.

A healthy home functions best when both husband and wife contribute to the success of the household. Every family organizes responsibilities differently. The issue is not who performs which task. The issue is whether both spouses feel supported and valued.

When one spouse consistently feels overwhelmed while the other remains disengaged, frustration often develops. When both spouses work together as a team, trust and appreciation grow.

Domestic support communicates: "We are in this together."

For special-needs families, this need becomes especially important. Appointments, therapies, medical concerns, educational planning, advocacy, and caregiving responsibilities often create significant pressure. When spouses intentionally support one another, the burden becomes lighter and the marriage becomes stronger.

EMOTIONAL NEED #6 – FAMILY COMMITMENT

Family commitment is the assurance that your spouse places a high value on the family.

It communicates dedication, involvement, and intentional investment in the people God has entrusted to your care.

Children flourish when they know they are loved. Spouses flourish when they know they are not carrying family responsibilities alone.

Family commitment communicates: "Our family matters."

For special-needs families, this need often carries even greater significance. The journey may require additional sacrifice, flexibility, advocacy, patience, and perseverance. When husbands and wives share that commitment together, they create an environment where both the marriage and the family can thrive.

EMOTIONAL NEED #7 – ADMIRATION

Every person wants to feel valued. Every person wants to know that their efforts matter.

Admiration is expressed through appreciation, encouragement, gratitude, and respect. It recognizes strengths. It celebrates accomplishments. It notices contributions.

It communicates: "I see you." "I appreciate you." "I value what you bring to this relationship."

Many spouses are quick to notice what is missing while overlooking what is present. Healthy marriages intentionally practice appreciation.

Admiration creates powerful deposits in the Love Bank because it reminds our spouse that they are respected and valued.

EMOTIONAL NEED #8 – FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial support is not simply about money. It is about security.

It reflects responsible stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to us.

Financial stress is one of the most common sources of marital conflict. When couples share financial goals, communicate openly about money, and work together as a team, trust increases.

This need is not about wealth. It is about faithfulness. It is about creating confidence that the family is being cared for responsibly.

Financial support communicates: "I am committed to helping provide stability and security for our future."

EMOTIONAL NEED #9 – HONESTY AND OPENNESS

Trust cannot flourish where honesty is absent.

Honesty and openness involve far more than simply telling the truth when asked a question. They involve living transparently with your spouse.

Healthy marriages are built upon a foundation of openness regarding the past, the present, and the future.

We must be open about our past. Our spouse should know who we are, where we have been, what experiences have shaped us, what wounds we carry, what victories we celebrate, and what lessons we have learned.

We must be open about our present. Our thoughts. Our feelings. Our struggles. Our fears. Our frustrations. Our victories. Our dreams.

We must be open about our future. What are our hopes? What are our goals? What are our dreams for our marriage? What kind of legacy do we hope to leave behind?

Healthy couples regularly discuss the future because they are intentionally building that future together.

Honesty and openness communicate: "There are no walls between us." "There are no hidden rooms in my life." "I trust you with my story."

When honesty and openness are practiced consistently, trust deepens. When trust deepens, emotional intimacy flourishes. When emotional intimacy flourishes, the Love Bank grows.

EMOTIONAL NEED #10 – SEXUAL FULFILLMENT

God designed sexual intimacy as a beautiful expression of marital oneness.

Sexual fulfillment is far more than a physical experience. It involves emotional connection, acceptance, vulnerability, affection, trust, and mutual care.

Within God's design for marriage, sexual intimacy becomes one of the deepest expressions of covenant love.

When husbands and wives approach intimacy with selflessness, understanding, and mutual respect, emotional connection often deepens as well.

Sexual fulfillment communicates: "I choose you. I desire you. I cherish our relationship."

BECOMING IRRESISTIBLE

One of Dr. Harley's most powerful teachings is the concept of becoming irresistible to your spouse.

This does not mean manipulation. It does not mean pretending to be someone you are not. It does not mean trying to control your spouse's feelings.

Instead, it means intentionally becoming the kind of husband or wife who consistently meets the emotional needs of the person you married.

THE IRRESISTIBLE HUSBAND

An irresistible husband consistently creates an environment where his wife feels loved, valued, safe, appreciated, and understood.

He listens. He communicates. He shows affection. He spends meaningful time with his wife. He demonstrates family commitment. He expresses admiration and appreciation. He intentionally seeks to understand his wife's emotional needs and consistently works to meet them.

He creates emotional safety, friendship, and connection that strengthen every aspect of the marriage relationship, including physical intimacy.

He becomes the husband his wife loves being with because she consistently experiences care, connection, security, and sacrificial love in the relationship.

THE IRRESISTIBLE WIFE

An irresistible wife consistently creates an environment where her husband feels respected, admired, desired, appreciated, and emotionally connected.

She values the relationship. She communicates openly. She demonstrates affection. She supports the family. She expresses appreciation. She intentionally seeks to understand her husband's emotional needs and strives to meet them.

She recognizes that sexual intimacy is an important part of marital connection and seeks to nurture that area of the relationship with love, care, and mutual consideration.

She understands that physical intimacy is not merely a physical act but one of the ways husbands and wives express acceptance, commitment, affection, and covenant love.

She becomes the wife her husband loves being with because she consistently creates connection, encouragement, emotional closeness, relational intimacy, and a fulfilling marital partnership.

THE BIGGER PRINCIPLE

The ultimate goal is not becoming irresistible for our own benefit. The goal is learning how to love our spouse well.

When two people intentionally seek to meet one another's emotional needs, something beautiful happens.

The Love Bank grows. Trust grows. Friendship grows. Attraction grows. Connection grows.

This is not about perfection. It is about intentionality. It is about becoming the spouse your husband or wife enjoys coming home to.

A PREVIEW OF WHAT COMES NEXT

In our final session, we will bring these concepts together through what we call the 15 Hours of Intentionality.

We will explore how intentional time invested in affection, intimate conversation, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment can dramatically strengthen a marriage and create lifelong connection.

As we conclude this session, remember this:

The strongest marriages are not built on good intentions. They are built on intentional actions.

DISCOVERING YOUR SPOUSE'S EMOTIONAL NEEDS PROFILE

One of the greatest challenges in marriage is that we naturally tend to love our spouse the way we like to receive love.

Unfortunately, our spouse is not wired exactly like we are.

God created each of us uniquely.

We all have emotional needs, but we prioritize those needs differently.

What may be extremely important to one spouse may be far less important to the other.

This exercise is designed to help you discover how God uniquely wired your spouse.

Dr. Harley identified ten emotional needs commonly found in marriage:

1. Affection
2. Intimate Conversation
3. Recreational Companionship
4. Physical Appearance
5. Domestic Support
6. Family Commitment
7. Admiration
8. Financial Support
9. Honesty and Openness
10. Sexual Fulfillment

STEP ONE – RANK YOUR NEEDS

Working independently, rank these ten emotional needs in order from 1 to 10.

#1 should represent your most important emotional need.

#10 should represent your least important emotional need.

Do not discuss your answers with your spouse during this portion of the exercise.

Work independently and honestly.

There are no right or wrong answers.

STEP TWO – EXPLAIN YOUR NEEDS

After ranking your emotional needs, write a brief paragraph for each need explaining:

- What this need means to you.
- What happens emotionally when this need is not being met.
- What happens emotionally when this need is being met consistently.

The purpose is not simply to identify the need.

The purpose is to help your spouse understand how that need affects your heart.

STEP THREE – SHARE WITHOUT INTERRUPTION

After both spouses have completed the exercise, schedule a time to sit together without interruptions.

Turn off phones.

Turn off televisions.

Remove distractions.

One spouse should share their rankings and explanations while the other spouse listens.

No interrupting.

No correcting.

No defending.

No debating.

Simply listen.

Then reverse roles and allow the other spouse to share.

The goal is understanding, not agreement.

STEP FOUR – EXCHANGE YOUR WORKSHEETS

Exchange your completed worksheets.

You now possess something incredibly valuable.

You have a roadmap to your spouse's heart.

You have a practical guide to understanding how God uniquely wired the person you married.

STEP FIVE – REVIEW REGULARLY

Review these worksheets periodically.

Why?

Because we all drift.

Over time, we naturally return to expressing love in the way we prefer to receive it.

These worksheets help us remember what matters most to our spouse.

The strongest marriages never stop growing because the strongest couples never stop learning one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the emotional needs discussed in this session stood out to you the most and why?

2. Which of the six emotional needs discussed in this session do you believe is most important to your spouse?

3. Which of these emotional needs do you believe is one of your own top three needs?

4. How does domestic support affect the emotional climate of a marriage?

5. What are some practical ways you and your spouse can better support one another at home?

6. In what ways have you demonstrated family commitment during your marriage?

7. How has raising a child with special needs strengthened your understanding of family commitment?

8. When was the last time you intentionally expressed admiration and appreciation for your spouse?

9. How comfortable are you discussing finances openly and honestly with your spouse?

10. Which area of honesty and openness is easiest for you: sharing your past, your present feelings, or your future dreams?

11. What did you learn from Dr. Harley's concept of becoming irresistible?

12. What qualities of an irresistible husband or irresistible wife do you believe are already present in your marriage?

13. Which qualities would you like to strengthen moving forward?

14. How would your marriage change if both of you intentionally focused on meeting each other's emotional needs more consistently?

ACTION STEPS

- □ Complete the Emotional Needs Profile Exercise.
- □ Exchange worksheets and discuss them without interruption.
- □ Identify your spouse's top three emotional needs.
- □ Ask your spouse if you identified those needs correctly.
- □ Share one area where you feel especially loved by your spouse.
- □ Pray together and ask God to help you become the husband or wife He has called you to be.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Emotional needs are legitimate needs that influence connection within marriage.**
- **Husbands and wives often prioritize emotional needs differently.**
- **Domestic support communicates partnership.**
- **Family commitment communicates dedication.**
- **Admiration communicates value and appreciation.**
- **Financial support creates confidence and security.**
- **Honesty and openness build trust and intimacy.**
- **Sexual fulfillment is one of God's gifts to strengthen marital oneness.**
- **Becoming irresistible is not about manipulation; it is about learning how to love your spouse well.**
- **The Emotional Needs Profile Exercise provides a practical roadmap for understanding your spouse.**

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the gift of marriage and for the opportunity to grow together throughout every season of life.

Help us to better understand the emotional needs of our spouse and to love one another with intentionality, patience, and grace.

May our marriages reflect Your love, Your faithfulness, and Your grace.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

SCRIPTURE INDEX

Genesis 2:24

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Romans 12:10

Philippians 2:3-4

Ephesians 4:25

Ephesians 4:29

Ephesians 5:25

Ephesians 5:33

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Hebrews 13:4

Emotional Needs Discovery Worksheet
God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage

Instructions:

Below are Dr. Willard Harley's Ten Emotional Needs. Rank them from 1–10 based on their importance to you personally.

1 = Most Important

10 = Least Important

After ranking the needs, complete the worksheet page for each emotional need. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to help your spouse better understand what makes you feel loved, valued, and connected. When finished, exchange your worksheets and discuss your responses together.

My Emotional Needs Ranking

_____ Affection

_____ Sexual Fulfillment

_____ Intimate Conversation

_____ Recreational Companionship

_____ Honesty and Openness

_____ Physical Attractiveness

_____ Financial Support

_____ Domestic Support

_____ Family Commitment

_____ Admiration

AFFECTION - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

SEXUAL FULFILLMENT - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

INTIMATE CONVERSATION - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

RECREATIONAL COMPANIONSHIP - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

HONESTY AND OPENNESS - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

FINANCIAL SUPPORT - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

DOMESTIC SUPPORT - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

FAMILY COMMITMENT - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:

ADMIRATION - MY RANK FOR THIS NEED: _____

What does this emotional need mean to me?

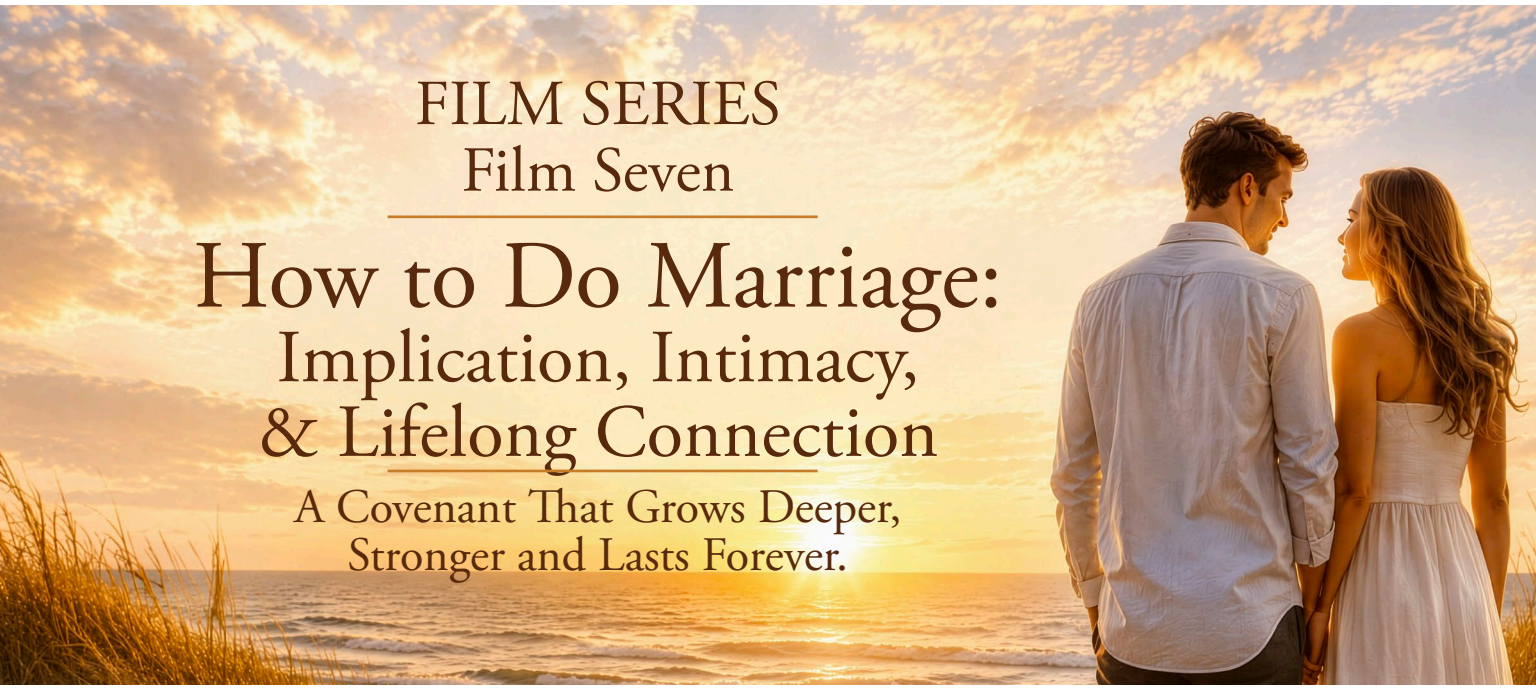
How do I feel when this need is met?

What behaviors from my spouse help meet this need?

How do I feel when this need is not met?

Why is this emotional need especially important to me?

One practical thing my spouse can do to better meet this need:



A Look Back at Our Journey

As we begin our final session together, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the journey we have traveled throughout this series.

In Film One, we explored the Biblical Foundation of Marriage and discovered that God's idea. We learned that husband and wife were created to become one and that God's design for marriage was unity, partnership, and purpose.

In Film Two, we explored what marriage is really for. We discovered that marriage is about much more than personal happiness. God uses marriage to shape our character and teach us how to love sacrificially.

In Film Three, we examined the soulful dimension of marriage and learned the difference between manipulation and ministry.

In Film Four, we focused on communication and discovered how healthy communication creates understanding, connection, and trust.

In Film Five, we introduced the Love Bank and emotional needs.

In Film Six, we explored the remaining emotional needs and discussed becoming irresistible by intentionally meeting the needs of the person we married.

Now we arrive at our final session.

How do we take everything we have learned and put it into practice for a lifetime?

The answer is intentionality.

The answer is friendship.

The answer is intimacy.

The answer is continuing to pursue the person we married for the rest of our lives.

LIVING OUT GOD'S DESIGN FOR A LIFETIME

Healthy marriages do not drift together. They drift apart.

No couple accidentally develops deep friendship, emotional intimacy, spiritual connection, and physical closeness. These things happen when husbands and wives intentionally invest in their relationship over time.

Dr. Willard Harley observed that strong marriages consistently invest in four key areas:

1. Affection.
2. Intimate Conversation.
3. Recreational Companionship.
4. Sexual Fulfillment.

Together these form what we call the 15 Hours of Intentionality.

THE 15 HOURS OF INTENTIONALITY

This concept is not legalism, a scorecard, or a guilt-producing exercise.

It is a reminder that healthy marriages require intentional investment.

For special-needs families, fifteen hours may sound impossible during some seasons.

That is okay.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is progress.

The goal is intentionality.

Start where you are and build from there.

What we invest in grows. What we neglect often declines.

AFFECTION

Affection communicates warmth, tenderness, care, and connection.

Small acts of affection often create some of the largest deposits in the Love Bank.

A hug.

Holding hands.

A kiss.

A loving text.

A note of encouragement.

A simple touch on the shoulder.

Affection communicates:

"You matter to me."

INTIMATE CONVERSATION

Intimate conversation is the sharing of hearts.

Healthy marriages intentionally protect time for meaningful conversation.

Not simply exchanging information.

But exchanging understanding.

It is discussing hopes, dreams, fears, victories, disappointments, and the everyday experiences of life.

Many couples spend significant time talking before marriage but gradually stop talking after marriage.

That is why intentional conversation must be protected.

RECREATIONAL COMPANIONSHIP

Healthy marriages require friendship.

Friendship grows when couples enjoy life together and create memories together.

The activity itself is less important than the shared experience.

Walking together.

Traveling together.

Serving together.

Laughing together.

Creating memories together.

Couples who continue enjoying life together often continue growing together.

SEXUAL FULFILLMENT

Sexual fulfillment is the fourth part of the 15 Hours of Intentionality.

God designed sexual intimacy as a beautiful and important part of marriage.

It is one of the ways husbands and wives experience oneness, closeness, desire, affection, vulnerability, and covenant love.

This area of marriage should never be treated as unimportant.

It should never be ignored.

It should never be pushed so far to the side that it quietly disappears from the relationship.

Sexual fulfillment is not merely physical.

It is emotional.

It is relational.

It is spiritual.

It is part of the way God designed husbands and wives to remain connected.

When this area is nurtured with love, patience, care, and mutual understanding, it can become one of the deepest expressions of marital intimacy.

THE THIRD DIMENSION OF THE TRICHOTOMY

Throughout this workbook we have discussed the trichotomy of marriage.

We are spiritual beings.

We are soulful beings.

We are physical beings.

Healthy marriages intentionally invest in all three dimensions.

Many couples nurture the spiritual dimension and strengthen the soulful dimension through communication and emotional connection.

Yet the physical dimension is often the easiest one to neglect.

This is especially true in special-needs families where therapies, appointments, caregiving responsibilities, financial pressures, and exhaustion compete for time and energy.

Many couples discover that physical intimacy has quietly slipped away.

Not because they stopped loving one another.

Not because they no longer care.

But because life became overwhelming.

Like every other part of marriage, intimacy must be protected, nurtured, and prioritized.

God designed sexual intimacy as part of marital oneness, connection, vulnerability, acceptance, affection, and covenant love.

It is not merely physical.

It is emotional.

It is relational.

It is spiritual.

All three dimensions matter.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENTIONAL INTIMACY

One of the most practical suggestions we can offer is scheduling time for intimacy.

At first that may sound unromantic.

Many couples resist the idea because they believe intimacy should always happen spontaneously.

But real life often does not work that way, especially for busy couples and special-needs families.

If couples wait until everything is perfect, intimacy often gets pushed further and further down the priority list.

Scheduling intimacy communicates:

"Our relationship matters."

"We are protecting this part of our marriage."

"We refuse to allow life's demands to crowd out something God designed for our good."

Ironically, scheduling intimacy often becomes more romantic rather than less romantic.

Think about it.

If a husband knows that he and his wife have intentionally planned time together on a Saturday evening, what is he likely thinking about throughout the day?

He is thinking about his wife.

He is anticipating being together.

He is looking forward to connection.

The same can be true for a wife.

Anticipation often creates excitement.

Excitement often creates connection.

Connection often creates romance.

What began as a scheduled appointment can become something deeply meaningful because both spouses have intentionally prepared their hearts and minds for one another.

The goal is not merely scheduling intimacy.

The goal is protecting intimacy.

For many couples in the special-needs community, intentional scheduling may be the very thing that keeps physical intimacy from quietly disappearing beneath the weight of everyday responsibilities.

A RESOURCE WE RECOMMEND

One of the most helpful Christian books we have found on the subject of marital intimacy is Dr. Kevin Leman's book, Sheet Music.

For many Christian couples, conversations about intimacy can feel uncomfortable, awkward, or intimidating.

What makes Dr. Leman's approach so valuable is that he addresses the subject honestly while maintaining respect, humor, and biblical perspective.

He is direct when he needs to be direct.

He is practical when he needs to be practical.

Yet he consistently treats the subject with dignity and good taste.

He reminds couples that intimacy is not something God reluctantly tolerates within marriage. It is something God intentionally designed as part of the marriage relationship.

One exercise we often recommend is that husbands read the book with a blue highlighter and wives read the book with a pink highlighter.

Highlight the passages that speak most strongly to you.

Then come together and discuss what you highlighted.

Many couples are surprised by what they discover.

Men and women often approach intimacy from very different perspectives.

These differences are not problems.

They are opportunities to listen, learn, understand, and love one another more effectively.

The goal is not to convince your spouse to think exactly like you.

The goal is to better understand how God uniquely wired the person you married.

As understanding grows, trust grows.

As trust grows, intimacy grows.

As intimacy grows, friendship grows.

BECOMING LIFELONG STUDENTS OF ONE ANOTHER

One of the greatest gifts you can give your spouse is the commitment to never stop learning them.

People change.

Needs change.

Seasons change.

Healthy couples remain curious about one another.

THE WEEKLY MARRIAGE MEETING

Set aside time each week to discuss:

How are we doing emotionally?

How are we doing spiritually?

How are we doing physically?

What challenges are coming this week?

What are our prayer needs?

How can I better support you?

What intentional time will we protect this week?

A FINAL CHALLENGE

Marriage is not a destination.

Marriage is a lifelong journey.

No marriage is perfect.

Every marriage requires work, grace, forgiveness, and intentionality.

Your goal is not simply to stay married.

Your goal is to build a marriage that reflects God's love, God's grace, and God's design.

A marriage built spiritually.

A marriage built soulfully.

A marriage built physically.

A marriage that continues growing through every season of life.

A marriage that discovers the hidden gifts God provides along the journey.

And a marriage that honors Him for a lifetime.

THE 15 HOURS OF INTENTIONALITY COMMITMENT WORKSHEET

The goal of this worksheet is not perfection.

The goal is intentionality.

Especially for special-needs families, fifteen hours may seem impossible during certain seasons of life.

Do not become discouraged.

Start where you are.

Focus on progress rather than perfection.

Use this worksheet to intentionally invest in the four relationship-building areas discussed in this session.

AFFECTION

What intentional acts of affection will we practice this week?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hours We Intend To Invest This Week: _____

INTIMATE CONVERSATION

When will we intentionally set aside time to talk and connect this week?

Hours We Intend To Invest This Week: _____

RECREATIONAL COMPANIONSHIP

What activities will we enjoy together this week?

Hours We Intend To Invest This Week: _____

SEXUAL FULFILLMENT

How will we intentionally protect and prioritize this area of our marriage?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Hours We Intend To Invest This Week: _____

TOTAL HOURS WE PLAN TO INVEST THIS WEEK

_____ Hours

MARRIAGE INTENTIONALITY COMMITMENT



We understand that healthy marriages do not happen accidentally.

They require intentional investment.

We commit to intentionally investing time in our marriage relationship and working toward greater connection through affection, intimate conversation, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment.

We understand that seasons of life may affect the amount of time we can invest, but we commit to making our marriage relationship a priority and continuing to grow together spiritually, soulfully, and physically.

_____ _____

Husband Signature: Date:

_____ _____

Wife Signature: Date:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you most about the concept of the 15 Hours of Intentionality?

2. Which of the four areas comes most naturally to you?

3. Which of the four areas needs the greatest improvement in your marriage?

4. Why do healthy marriages require intentionality?

5. How has raising a child with special needs affected your ability to prioritize your marriage?

6. What did you learn from the discussion about scheduled intimacy?

7. How might scheduling intimacy actually increase anticipation and romance?

8. Why is friendship such an important part of marriage?

9. What does it mean to become a lifelong student of your spouse?

10. How could a Weekly Marriage Meeting strengthen your relationship?

11. Which practical step from this session are you most likely to implement?

12. What is one area of your marriage you want to intentionally strengthen over the next six months?

ACTION STEPS

□ Complete the 15 Hours of Intentionality Commitment Worksheet.

□ Schedule your first Weekly Marriage Meeting.

□ Plan one intentional activity in each of the four relationship-building areas.

□ Discuss what intimacy means to each of you.

□ Consider reading Dr. Kevin Leman's Sheet Music together.

□ Commit to becoming lifelong students of one another.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Healthy marriages do not drift together; they drift apart.
- Intentionality creates connection.
- Affection builds warmth and security.
- Intimate conversation builds understanding.
- Recreational companionship builds friendship.
- Sexual fulfillment strengthens marital oneness.
- Scheduled intimacy can increase anticipation and romance.
- The strongest marriages are built on friendship.
- Special-needs families must intentionally protect their marriage relationship.
- Lifelong connection requires lifelong learning.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for walking with us throughout this journey of marriage.

Help us to remain intentional in our love, faithful in our commitment, and gracious toward one another.

Help us invest in affection, intimate conversation, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment.

For special-needs families, provide strength, endurance, wisdom, and grace for every season.

May our marriages reflect Your love and bring glory to You.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

SCRIPTURE INDEX

Genesis 2:24

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Song of Solomon 2:16

Mark 10:9

John 13:34-35

Romans 12:10

Ephesians 4:2-3

Ephesians 5:21-33

Philippians 2:1-5

Hebrews 13:4

A Final Word From Matt and Glori



As we conclude this series, we would like to share one final thought from our own experience.

Over the years, we have had the privilege of walking alongside many couples from all kinds of backgrounds and circumstances. We have also had the opportunity to apply these principles in our own marriage, particularly within the unique calling of raising a child with special needs.

What we have discovered is something both simple and powerful.

When couples consistently apply God's principles for marriage, good marriages often become better.

Better marriages often become great.

And marriages that are struggling frequently begin moving in a healthier direction.

Why?

Because these principles are not merely our ideas.

They are rooted in God's design for marriage.

That is why we chose the title God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage.

A playbook only works when it is used.

The best football playbook in the world accomplishes nothing if it sits on a shelf.

In the same way, the principles we have discussed throughout this series only become life-changing when they are intentionally practiced.

No marriage is perfect.

Every marriage experiences challenges.

Every marriage encounters seasons of difficulty.

Every marriage requires grace.

But when husbands and wives commit themselves to God's design, continue learning one another, meet one another's needs, communicate openly, invest intentionally, and keep Christ at the center of their relationship, healthy growth almost always follows.

Our encouragement to you is simple:

- Do not put this workbook on a shelf and forget about it.
- Return to it often.
- Review the principles.
- Revisit the exercises.
- Discuss the questions again.
- Pull out the worksheets.
- Refresh your commitment.
- Continue growing.
- Continue learning.
- Continue investing.
- Most importantly, continue pursuing one another.

Marriage is not a destination.

It is a lifelong journey.

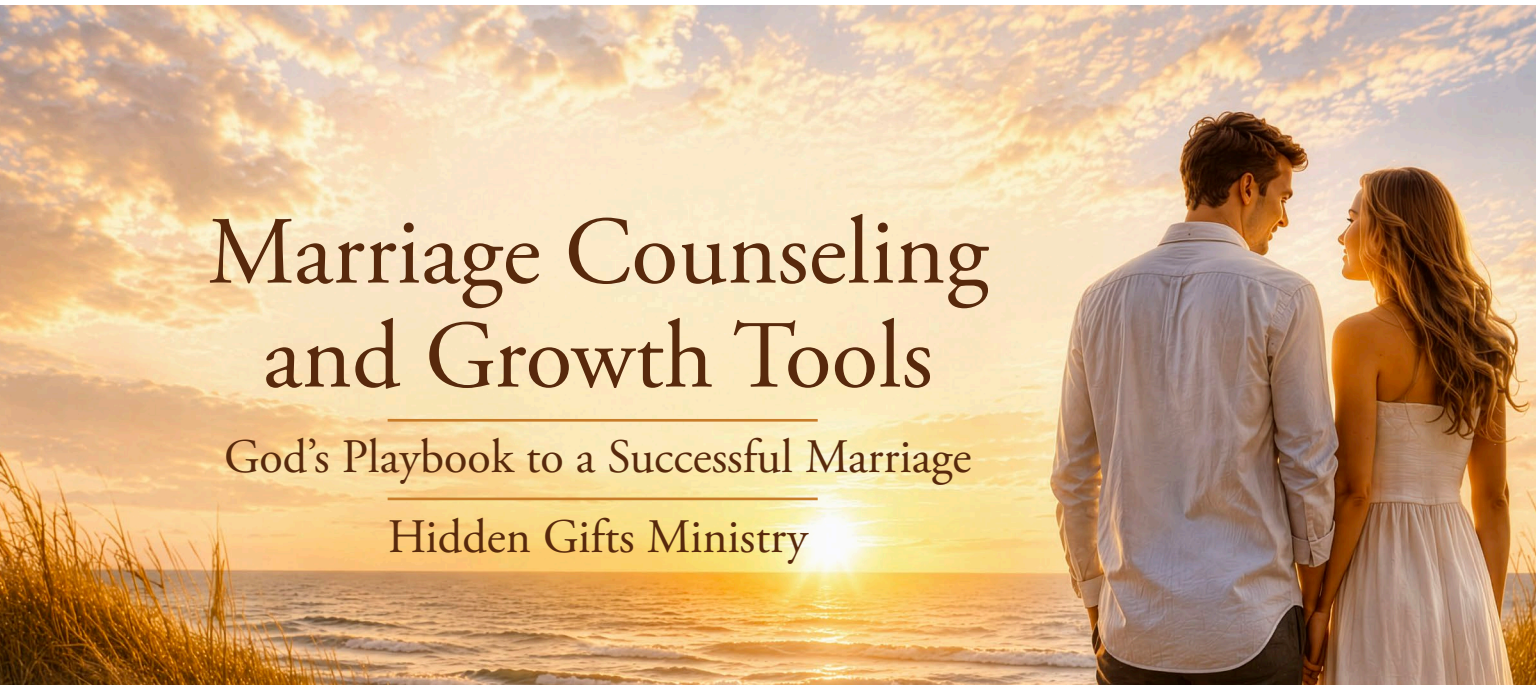
And the beautiful truth is that God desires to walk that journey with you.

May God richly bless your marriage, strengthen your friendship, deepen your intimacy, and help you discover the many hidden gifts He has prepared for you along the way.

In Christ's Love,

Matt and Glori

Hidden Gifts Ministry



Purpose

These tools are designed to help couples grow together in a spirit of humility, grace, and teamwork.

The goal is not to determine who is right or wrong. The goal is to better understand one another, strengthen emotional connection, and create a healthier marriage.

Healthy marriages are built when two people are committed to learning, growing, forgiving, and serving one another.

Use these tools regularly as preventative maintenance for your marriage, not just during seasons of conflict.

HOW TO USE THESE TOOLS

1. Pray together before beginning.
2. Complete the Growth Inventory individually.
3. Share your responses calmly and honestly.
4. Listen without interrupting or becoming defensive.
5. Reflect back what you heard before responding.
6. Select ONE area of growth to focus on together.
7. Encourage progress rather than demanding perfection.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Ephesians 4:2
"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Hebrews 10:24
"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

Philippians 2:3
"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves."

MARRIAGE GROWTH CONVERSATION WORKSHEET

Husband's Response:

What is one area where you feel our marriage is doing well?

What is one area where you would like us to grow?

What is one practical step we could take this week?

Wife's Response:

What is one area where you feel our marriage is doing well?

What is one area where you would like us to grow?

What is one practical step we could take this week?

MARRIAGE RESET CONVERSATION WORKSHEET

What Was Said or Done?

What I Felt

Why I Think I Felt This Way

What I Needed

What We Can Do Differently Next Time

MARRIAGE GROWTH INVENTORY

Communication _____

Time Together _____

Conflict Resolution _____

Spiritual Life Together _____

Emotional Support _____

Which area is currently strongest?

Which area needs the most attention?

What is one specific action we can take this month?

MARRIAGE GROWTH COVENANT

Area of Growth We Are Committing To

First Action Step

How We Will Encourage One Another

We commit to pursuing growth together, extending grace to one another, and honoring God through our marriage.

Husband Signature _____ Date _____

Wife Signature _____ Date _____

CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT

Healthy marriages are not built by perfect people.

They are built by two imperfect people who continually choose grace, forgiveness, humility, and love.

Keep growing. Keep serving. Keep communicating. Keep choosing each other.

Most importantly, keep inviting God into your marriage journey.

"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Mark 10:9

Resources and Acknowledgments



God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage was developed through years of ministry experience, marriage mentoring, biblical study, and practical application. We gratefully acknowledge the following resources that helped shape the principles presented throughout this workbook.

The Holy Bible

The foundation for every principle presented in this workbook is God's Word.

Marriage was God's idea, and His design remains the ultimate source of wisdom for healthy, thriving relationships.

Scripture references throughout this workbook have been drawn primarily from the Holy Bible and serve as the cornerstone of every teaching presented.

The Marriage Builder

Dr. Larry Crabb

Dr. Larry Crabb's insights regarding the spiritual and soulful dimensions of relationships significantly influenced portions of this workbook.

His emphasis on understanding the deeper needs of the human heart, ministry within relationships, and God's transformational work through marriage helped shape many of the concepts presented in Films Two and Three.

His Needs, Her Needs

Dr. Willard F. Harley, Jr.

Dr. Harley's groundbreaking work on emotional needs, the Love Bank concept, and intentional investment in marriage provided significant influence for Films Five, Six, and Seven.

Particularly helpful were his teachings regarding:

- Emotional Needs
- The Love Bank
- Affection
- Intimate Conversation
- Recreational Companionship
- Sexual Fulfillment
- Intentional Time Together

His practical framework continues to help couples better understand and meet one another's needs.

Sheet Music

Dr. Kevin Leman

Dr. Leman's thoughtful and biblically grounded approach to marital intimacy influenced portions of Film Seven.

His ability to address a sensitive topic with honesty, humor, wisdom, and practical application has helped countless Christian couples strengthen the physical dimension of their marriage relationship.

We highly recommend Sheet Music as a supplemental resource for couples desiring to grow in intimacy, understanding, and connection.

A Final Note



While many excellent authors and resources contributed to our understanding of marriage over the years, every principle presented in this workbook has been filtered through the lens of Scripture, practical ministry experience, and the unique challenges faced by special-needs families.

It is our prayer that these resources, combined with God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, will help couples build marriages that grow deeper, stronger, and last a lifetime.

Matt and Glori

Hidden Gifts Ministry

A Seven-Film Journey into God's Design for Marriage

Marriage is a God-given design of companionship, spiritual growth, and enduring love.

In ***God's Playbook to a Successful Marriage***, couples are invited to rediscover God's design for marriage through a seven-film journey exploring the spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions of a thriving relationship.

Especially mindful of the unique calling of families navigating special needs, this series offers practical wisdom biblical encouragement, and meaningful conversations that help couples strengthen their connection and find the hidden gifts within their marriage.

Inside This Workbook

- Guided couple conversations
- Scripture-centered teaching
- Practical relationship tools
- Reflection questions for each film



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www.HiddenGiftsMinistry.org