

A photograph of a man and a young girl washing their hands at a sink. The man is standing behind the girl, and both are looking down at their hands. The image is overlaid with a teal color. The text "CHRISTIAN FAMILY" is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

# CHRISTIAN FAMILY

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Shepherds Global Classroom exists to equip the body of Christ by providing curriculum for rising Christian leaders around the world. We aim to multiply indigenous training programs by placing a 20-course curriculum tool into the hands of spiritual trainers in every country of the world.

This book is available for free download at <https://www.shepherdsglobal.org/downloads>

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# COURSE OVERVIEW

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course teaches God's principles for stages of life and family relationships, particularly marriage and child raising. Through this study, students will be equipped to honor God in their current stage of life and in their relationships. They will be prepared to teach others biblical principles and practical applications of those principles. Students will be motivated to engage with their local church in making an impact for godliness in the families of their society and community.

Among other things, students will be learning about family discipleship of children and adolescents. Lesson 12, Assignment 3 instructs parents who are taking this course to plan daily devotional times for their family. Shepherds Global Classroom has produced a family discipleship book, *Family Teaching Tools*, which parents may want to use during their family devotions. This book is available for download from [shepherdsglobal.org](http://shepherdsglobal.org).

## DIRECTIONS FOR CLASS LEADERS

**Discussion questions** and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points. For discussion questions, the class leader should ask the question and give students time to discuss the answer. If the same student usually answers first, or if some students do not speak up, the leader can direct the question to someone: "Igor, how would you answer this question?"

Each lesson ends with several optional questions for group discussion. The class leader may choose which questions to discuss with the group.

Much **scripture** is used in the course. Passages that should be read aloud in class are indicated by arrow bullet points. Everyone in the group should look at the scripture, while one student reads it out loud. At other times, scripture references are given in parentheses in the text. For example: (Ephesians 6:1). Those references are support for the statements in the text. It is not necessary to always read the passages in parentheses.

Brief discussions of two special topics are included at the end of this course. These topics do not completely relate to any other lessons and are not whole lessons in themselves. Yet, they are important topics to understand from a Christian point of view. The class should study and discuss Appendix A following Lesson 3 and should study Appendix B following Lesson 10. Reminders are given at the end of those two lessons.

Each lesson ends with **assignments**. Assignments should be completed and reported before the next lesson time. If a student does not complete an assignment, he can do it later. However, the leader should encourage students to keep on schedule so that they learn more from the class. In addition to completing the assignments for each lesson, students should read through the next lesson in preparation for the following class.

If students want to **earn a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom**, they should attend the class sessions and complete the assignments. A form is provided at the end of the course for recording the assignments completed.

## LESSON 1

# CREATED FOR RELATIONSHIP

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Realize and value the relationship God wants to have with us.
2. Understand and value the image of God in each person.
3. Realize we are accountable to God for the choices we make in our relationships.
4. Know that the Bible is our manual for godly relationships, and that we are to imitate God in our relationships.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

In scripture, we learn that God is a personal God, who has relationships and communicates with others (Hebrews 1:1-2). Scripture shows us that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have been in relationship with each other for all of eternity.<sup>1</sup>

God created the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them (Exodus 20:11). Psalm 8:3-8 shows us that humanity was his best and most important creation. God made people as relational beings, just as he is a relational being. Throughout scripture, God invites people into life-giving relationship with himself.<sup>2</sup>

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1 For example, these scriptures show the relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: John 17:22-24; John 14:16, 26; and John 15:26. Though those verses do not talk about how the Holy Spirit is eternal, we know from other verses, such as Hebrews 9:14, that he is also eternal.

2 For example, see Isaiah 55:3, John 1:12-13, John 3:36, John 17:3, 2 Corinthians 6:16-18, 1 John 1:3, Revelation 3:20.



How wonderful to realize that God, the Creator of the universe, desires a relationship with you and with me!

» A student should read Genesis 3:8-9 for the group.

Pause for a moment, close your eyes, and imagine the scene you have just read. Use your imagination to make these verses come to life. Standing in the most beautiful garden in the cool part of the day, feel a delightful breeze on your face. Listen for the sound of God's footsteps and hear the silent response of his two loved creatures; then God's question, "Where are you?"

Can you imagine what that moment was like, as God calls out for fellowship with man and woman? Pause again to consider the heart of God. God desires—and seeks—fellowship with Adam and Eve, with you, and with me!

Even though we have separated ourselves from God by our disobedience to him (Isaiah 59:2), God still desires relationship with every living person. Luke 19:10 shows us that he is seeking every sinner. God is still asking, "Where are you?" Because Jesus died for us, we can come back into right relationship with him (Ephesians 2:13, 19). You and I have been created for relationship with God.

## OUR CREATOR'S DESIGN

Those who do not believe in the loving and purposeful creation of God struggle to create their own identity and purpose. It is impossible to rightly understand humanity apart from relationship with God. A person who lives by the counsel of worldly wisdom—human-centered pursuit of happiness—cannot really understand life.

To truly understand our identity (who we are), our purpose (why we exist), and how we are designed, we must know our Creator's purpose, which is found in the Holy Bible. God already established our identity; it is not something we invent. He has created us with purpose and designed us intentionally. It is only when we understand his plan for our lives and relationships that we can be who we ought to be and can fulfill his purpose for our existence.

Being made in God's image means that people were uniquely created for relationship. Just as God is relational, he made people relational beings. God designed the soul, spirit, and body of each person for relationship with God and with others.

## Our Manual for Human Relationships

The fact that God designed people for relationship implies that he has principles and guidelines for our relationships. The manufacturer of a product writes a product manual that

explains the product's design and how to use it. In the same way, God has given us His Word, the Bible, which explains our design and how our lives and relationships can work properly.

The Bible clearly describes the roles God has ordained for human relationships. It addresses the roles and relationships of husbands and wives; fathers, mothers, and children; brothers and sisters; grandparents; friends; enemies; neighbors; governments and citizens; and employers and employees. The principles of God's Word teach us his design for us, no matter our circumstances or environment. The Bible teaches us God's will for us in every stage of life.

Human societies and cultures reflect God's design, though imperfectly. Cultures describe normal human behavior for all relationships and situations. Each culture has its own ways of raising children and maintaining a marriage relationship. Cultures demonstrate great diversity in traditions, environments, genetics, and key events, but every culture shares a basic morality. For instance, every culture has a form of marriage. However, all behavior must be evaluated by biblical principles, not by cultural norms. The Bible is our authority; culture is not (Romans 12:2).

Cultural details are not necessarily neutral, and we should not expect them to be (Ephesians 2:2). Cultures are developed by fallen people who are shaped by wrong desires and self-centeredness. A society may have some knowledge of biblical truth, yet no society consistently conforms to God's standard of right and wrong. Nothing should be justified merely because it is cultural. The Bible alone perfectly shows us God's standard (Psalm 19:7-11).

If you visit the country of Libya and notice that Libyans drive without concern for safety, you might think, "That's just their culture; their driving style works for them." It is true that they have developed their own cultural style of driving. However, Libya has the highest rate of traffic fatalities in the world. Their rate is twice as high as the country that has the second highest rate of traffic fatalities in the world. Obviously, their culture has not developed a good style of driving.

God knows how life should work and has given us rules. We are not to simply experiment and explore. We are not to just do what seems to give us what we want. We should not just try to achieve what we imagine will be a happy life. We must follow God's design for relationships.

The beautiful thing is that obedience to God's instructions is good for us. God has given us commandments because He loves us (Deuteronomy 6:24). By keeping them, we enjoy good results and are protected from many bad consequences. Our Designer knows what is best for us, and when we follow his plan, we are blessed.

## Accountability to God in Relationships

- » How does our behavior toward other people affect our relationships with God?
- » Students should read each of the following passages for the group. Briefly discuss what God requires in these human relationships, and how obedience affects our relationships with God. How would disobeying God's instruction affect our relationship with God?

| OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD |             |                                           |                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scripture Passage                                            | Person/Role | What God Requires in Human Relationship   | Effect on Relationship with God                                                        |
| 1 Peter 3:7                                                  | Husband     | Be understanding of and honoring to wife. | A husband's prayers are not hindered.                                                  |
| Ephesians 5:22, 24, 33; 1 Peter 3:1-6                        | Wife        | Be submissive to husband.                 | That is how a wife is submissive to God. God values this attitude and behavior in her. |
| Colossians 3:20                                              | Child       | Obey parents in all things.               | This behavior pleases the Lord.                                                        |
| Matthew 6:12-15                                              | Everyone    | Forgive those who sin against us.         | God can forgive us.                                                                    |
| Romans 13:1-5                                                | Everyone    | Submit to earthly authorities.            | It is how we obey God.                                                                 |
| 1 Peter 2:18-20                                              | Servant     | Patiently endure unjust treatment.        | Servant finds favor with God.                                                          |

We are moral creatures, which means that we understand that some actions are wrong and some are right, and we are accountable to God for our choices. This gives us great potential and great responsibility. Our choices affect our relationship with God. Obedience to God's instructions about relationships is not just a practical matter of how we can be happy and get the best out of life. We are accountable to God for our decisions and our behavior in relationships (Romans 14:10, 12).

God calls us to treat others justly and to act in love and mercy (Micah 6:8). The problem is, because of Adam's sin, all of his descendants are born with a sinful nature (Romans 5:12, 19). Because of this, we cannot consistently act in loving, merciful, and just ways (Romans 7:15-24). But God's grace changes us when we are born again. The Holy Spirit enables us to fulfill God's requirements (Romans 8:3-4).

## Every Person's Worth

- » Students should read Isaiah 44:24, Psalm 139:13-16, Genesis 9:6, and James 3:9 for the group. What do these scriptures tell us about the value of each life? What gives a person value?

To have healthy relationships with others, we must value people as God does. **Every person is made in the image of God and is valuable just because of that.** Every individual is a unique creation of God, whether male or female, healthy or sick, whole or maimed or crippled, young or old, rich or poor (Proverbs 14:31), already born or still in their mother's womb; whatever the shade of their skin; and no matter their mental or physical abilities or limitations (Exodus 4:11).

There are cultures where the elderly are forgotten, females are treated as less valuable than males, or children are considered a bother. In some cultures, the maimed are considered cursed and are hidden or rejected from society. Across the world racism is common: One tribe or ethnic group considers itself superior to another and treats the other shamefully. Each of these actions devalue people, who are the most precious of all God's creation. To have healthy, God-honoring relationships, we must first think of all people as what they are—God's image bearers.

## CREATED FOR GOD, CREATED FOR OTHERS

Revelation 4:11 tells us that God created all things for himself. This certainly includes humanity. We are created by God, for God. All that we do, we are to do for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31, 1 Peter 2:12). We were also created for the benefit of other people.

**We were created to work with other people to accomplish God's purposes.** Marriage is one example of God's design for people to work together. Soon after God created the first man, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). Woman is similar to man in important ways, but different in other important ways. Together they can fulfill God's purposes for their existence. God gave them—together—the work they were to do (Genesis 1:26-28).

The church is another example of God's design for people to work together. The Apostle Paul used the illustration of the parts of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). A person should not think that he can fulfill God's purpose working alone or that he does not need other people. Marriage and the church are only two of many examples of God's design for people to work together.

**We are created to serve other people** (Galatians 5:13-14). We are created for loving relationships with others, in which we give of ourselves to benefit others.

- » Students should read Proverbs 17:17, Galatians 6:2, and Philippians 2:4 for the group.

We were created for God and for other people. Every requirement God makes of us in his Word relates to either our relationship with Him, our relationship with others, or to both relationships. In fact, Jesus said that everything God requires of us can be summarized by the commands to love God with all that we are and to love other people as we love ourselves.

- » A student should read Matthew 22:36-39 for the group.

We are created for God, and we are created for others; these facts are closely related. One of the primary areas in which we glorify God and reflect his image is in our interactions with others. God's character and actions obligate us to be like him (1 Peter 1:16, Matthew 5:48). All people are made in God's image, but we reflect God's nature and character when we act like he acts.

When someone shows mercy to the needy, his compassion is a copy of God's compassion, and his merciful act is an imitation of God's work. This is true regardless of whether the one showing mercy is a believer or an unbeliever. However, we best imitate God when we have been reconciled to him and have his Spirit working inside of us.

- » A student should read 2 Peter 1:2-11 for the group.

This passage explains God's awesome plan for each follower of Christ. From this passage we learn that:

1. By his glory and goodness, Jesus has both called us and given us wonderful promises (verses 3-4).
2. Through these promises, those of us who know Christ can have God's divine nature in us (verse 4).
3. Through relationship with God the Father and Jesus, we have everything we need for life and godliness (verse 3).
4. Because of these things, we can live like Jesus lived and as God has called us to live (verses 5-8).

- » How is it possible that we can reflect God's character and nature in our relationships?
- » A student should read 2 Corinthians 4:4 for the group. Who is the perfect picture of God?
- » A student should read 2 Corinthians 3:18 for the group.

The Holy Spirit changes believers to increasingly reflect the glory of the Lord. By looking at Jesus, we are made more and more like him in our attitudes and behavior. This is the beauty of the gospel. Through the power of God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, we can reflect and imitate God's character.

In our relationships with others, God calls us to imitate him (Ephesians 5:1). Just as a child watches and imitates his parent or older sibling, we are to look at the example of Jesus and then copy his attitudes, perspective, and actions as we interact with others (Philippians 2:5-7, Ephesians 5:2).

- » Students should read each of the following passages for the group. Make note of (1) God's character or work and (2) God's expectation for us. (Notes for the first two passages have already been written as an example. At the end of this lesson, Assignment 2 is a continuation of this study.)

| HOW HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS REFLECT GOD'S GLORY |                                                                                 |                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scripture                                   | What God Does/<br>What Christ Has Done                                          | Our Action that<br>Reflects God                                      |
| Philippians 2:3-8                           | Gave up his rights.<br>Became a servant.<br>Was completely humble and obedient. | Give up our rights.<br>Look out for others' interests.<br>Be humble. |
| John 13:3-5, 12-15                          | Served his disciples, meeting a practical need.                                 | Serve other believers.                                               |
| Ephesians 4:32-5:2                          |                                                                                 |                                                                      |

None of us naturally demonstrates God's love because we are born with a selfish nature. God provides grace to restore us to his design for us. A humble prayer of surrender can take a person through this transformation.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible reveals that God lovingly designed people for relationships: relationship with Him and relationships with others.

Because God is the Creator of people and the designer of relationships, we must:

1. Gain his perspective on our human relationships.
2. Realize our accountability to him for the choices we make in relationships.
3. Accept and follow his plan for our relationships.

This course of study will help you to do these things and will equip you to teach others God's will for human relationships.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » Why is culture insufficient as a guide for human relationships?
- » What concept in this lesson was new to you? Why is it important? How will understanding it help you with your relationships? How will understanding it affect your ministry?
- » How do you hope to grow because of studying this course?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for creating me in your image with a purpose for my life.

Thank you for designing me to have a relationship with you and making it possible through Jesus' death for my sins.

Thank you for the treasure of your Word, which teaches me how to relate to you and how to glorify you in my relationships with others.

Through your Word and your Spirit, teach me to embrace the life you have planned for me.

Help me to accurately reflect you to everyone around me, so that others can come to know you.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Explain how the truth of creation in God's image gives each person worth and how the denial of creation takes away human value.
2. In the table below, read each of the following scripture passages. Make note of (1) God's character or work and (2) God's expectation for us.
3. Looking at the table from Assignment 2, and the one given at the end of the lesson, take a moment to examine your life:
  - Are you currently reflecting the image of God in a way that honors and glorifies Him?
  - Is there any disobedience that must be confessed so that your life more clearly and powerfully aligns with God's purpose for your life?
  - What step does God want you to take to become more like Jesus?

Write a paragraph prayer in response to this study. (You are not required to share this writing with your class leader but may simply report that you did the assignment.)



| HOW HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS REFLECT GOD'S GLORY |                                        |                                 |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Scripture                                   | What God Does/<br>What Christ Has Done | Our Action that<br>Reflects God |
| Psalm 68:5;<br>James 1:27                   |                                        |                                 |
| 2 Peter 3:9;<br>Titus 3:1-5                 |                                        |                                 |
| Matthew 5:43-48,<br>1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 |                                        |                                 |
| John 13:1, 34;<br>1 John 4:7-8, 11-12       |                                        |                                 |

## LESSON 2

# A BIBLICAL FAMILY

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how marriage should reflect the relationships in the Trinity.
2. Embrace God's perspective on having children.
3. Understand how the Fall affected marriage and family relationships.
4. Appreciate how God's plan of salvation is fulfilled despite human flaws.
5. Realize that obedience to God's plan can help any family experience his grace and healing.

### EFFECTS OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In this course, we will mostly learn about the family that lives together in a single dwelling. Many different combinations of people form the groups that live in a home together and are called families. There are families with one parent, families divided by divorce, families combined by a second marriage, families that have adopted children, families with multiple generations, and families that are temporarily hosting extra children or adults.

Each of us has a mental concept of what *family* means. Discussions about family create different emotions in us, depending on our personal experiences.

### How Childhood Affects Us

Maybe you have wonderful memories of your childhood, or maybe you struggle with anger because of childhood experiences. Maybe your family members often help and encourage one another, or maybe they avoid each other and have only conflict when they are together. You may feel that your family has been a great foundation and help for your life, or maybe

your home felt like an imprisoning, painful environment that you were eager to escape. Maybe when you see families that seem better than yours, you feel that your family failed you.

Our understanding of our families is important because it influences our understanding of life and our understanding of who God is. The Bible speaks of God being the Father of his people. Our relationships with our parents—especially our fathers—shape our concept of our heavenly Father. If our human father was absent, abusive, neglectful, demanding, manipulative, passive, or hurtful in any way, our concept of God as Father will likely be damaged. Until we become acquainted with God through his Word, through the life of Jesus and through our personal walk with him, we may find it difficult to see him as a **good** Father. He truly is a good father who actively protects and provides for his children. He listens to and talks with his children, guides them, and delights in their well-being. God can help us to reshape our understanding of him as we get to know Him.<sup>3</sup>

## How Spiritual Differences Affect Us

Some of us have been rejected by our families because we follow Christ. Jesus said that we should expect persecution from unbelieving family members because of our devotion to him. In many places believers are betrayed, shamed, neglected, abused, or killed by their own family members who have rejected Christ.

- » A student should read Matthew 10:21-22, 28, 32-39. After reading these verses, discuss the following questions:
  - According to this passage, what should believers expect?
  - What promises are given here?
  - How should believers think about persecution?

Others of us may not experience persecution from family but may still experience relationship difficulties because of our faith. Maybe our family relationships are strained, distant, or limited because as believers our lives are so different from the lives of our family members. We may be misunderstood or disrespected. Relatives may try to hinder our ministry. Even Jesus experienced these difficulties (Mark 3:21, John 7:3, 5), so we should not be surprised if we do as well.

## YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

In a few minutes, you will introduce yourself to your classmates, but you will not just state your name, you will share about who you are in the context of your family.

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3 To learn about how you can renew your understanding of who God is, see Lesson 4 of *Spiritual Formation*, from Shepherds Global Classroom.

First, think about all the different titles you hold within your family, such as son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, uncle or aunt, grandfather or grandmother. Can you think of additional titles? You probably have several titles.

What other roles or places do you have in your family? Are you the oldest or youngest? The financial provider? A person who takes care of the home? A caregiver for an elderly or disabled person? Think of other roles and responsibilities you have within your family.

- » Introduce yourself to your classmates, listing several of your titles and roles within your family.
- » Now, take a moment to think about how your titles and roles influence (1) your view of yourself and (2) how you view others inside of your family.

Despite how you may feel about your immediate or extended family members, they are yours. Perhaps your family is broken, carrying marks of hurt and pain. Or maybe people are envious of your family because you seem to be perfect: you have a good marriage, intelligent and healthy children, and a home filled with love, peace, and laughter.

**Whether your family seems weak or strong, God is interested and involved in your family. He has a plan for *your* family.**

- » Write down the names of your family members (at least 3-4 generations of family members). For example, the names of your grandparents (1st generation), the names of your parents (2nd generation), your name and that of your siblings (3rd generation), the names of your children or nieces and nephews (4th generation).

Draw a star beside the names of those with whom you have a close and good relationship. Draw a triangle beside the names of those with whom you have a limited relationship, and a square around the names of those whom you are disconnected from for whatever reason.

Are there people whom you consider part of your family, though they are not actually related to you: people who attend all family gatherings and celebrations as if they were family? Write and circle their names.

## THE FIRST HUMAN FAMILY

- » Keep your Bible open to Genesis as we study the lives of Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah.

### The First Wedding

Adam and Eve were the first human family: one husband and one wife, one male and one female joined in marriage. At the first wedding, Adam stated, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:23).

The next verse gives the Biblical definition of marriage: “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). This same phrasing is repeated in the New Testament in Matthew 19:5 and Ephesians 5:31. **The one-flesh union of a man and a woman is an unconditional commitment, a promise before God and man that is to last for a lifetime.**

Marriage is a threefold miracle. It is a biological miracle by which two people actually become one flesh; it is a social miracle through which two families are grafted together; it is a spiritual miracle in that the marriage relationship pictures the union of Christ and His bride, the church.<sup>4</sup>

### Marriage Reflects Relationships in the Trinity

Marriage is designed to reflect God’s character and his relationships. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been and will always be in relationship with each other. Each is unique in his role, but all persons of the Trinity are permanently One and are of One essence. In the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, we see unity, intimacy, faithfulness, and steadfast love. Biblical marriage is patterned after this amazing relationship. God’s plan is for each husband and wife to be pure in their love and committed to each other for life.

The human marriage relationship should reflect the relationships within the Trinity in these ways:

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**“Marriage is a... demonstration of God’s character as the great covenant maker and covenant keeper. In a covenant, the crucial elements are fidelity and integrity, not emotion.”**

**Robertson McQuilkin**

*An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*

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4 *The Woman’s Study Bible*, (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995), 9.

1. Marriage is to be an unconditional, exclusive commitment to the other.
2. Marriage is to be a relationship of self-giving love.
3. Marriage is to be a fruitful relationship.

## The First Command

During the first wedding, which was conducted by God himself,

God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

To be fruitful and multiply is the first command God gave in the Bible. **Marriage is designed to be a fruitful relationship of self-giving love.** Reproduction within marriage glorifies the Creator, as husband and wife *together* further God’s creative work and bring more people into the family relationship. What a privilege and responsibility!

- » A student should read Psalm 127:3-5 for the group. This passage uses word pictures to describe children. What are the word pictures? Based on these word pictures, how should we think about our children?

The Bible shows us that children are a gift, a precious possession. They should not be thought of as merely the result of a sexual relationship. Whether or not the circumstances surrounding the conception of a child are desirable or righteous, the Giver of Life is intentional in the conception and birth of each child, including you and me. God has a purpose for each person no matter the circumstances of one’s birth.

Yes, children are a gift from God, but they are also the parents’ gift to God.

Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth (Malachi 2:15).

Children are a sacred trust. God expects parents to raise their children to fulfill his own purposes. God wants to use our children to further his kingdom (Genesis 18:19). God has trusted us to prepare our children for a life of serving him (Deuteronomy 6:2). We are not raising them to serve us or to fulfill our dreams. We should see them as arrows to be shot out to hit the target God has for them.

## The Fall and the Brokenness of the Human Family

In Genesis 3, the only perfect family to ever exist fell into a state of brokenness and absolute need of a Savior. Adam and Eve sinned, and the curse of death fell on all humanity. Adam and Eve's relationship with each other was permanently damaged, and they were separated from God.

Both man and woman suffered additional curses:

- Childbirth would be painful.
- Husbands would misuse authority.
- Wives would be defiant and disrespectful.
- Work would be frustrating and difficult.<sup>5</sup>

God's perfect plan for the family was distorted because people accepted Satan's lies.

Genesis 4 continues to reveal the brokenness of the fallen human family.

Notice Genesis 4:1, the first pregnancy and birth. This verse covers a nine-month timespan—the time between the conception of a child and the child's birth. Pause to imagine what those nine months of pregnancy must have been like for Eve, as she tried to share her fears and joys with Adam. There was no one to give her advice, no one to answer her questions. Her enlarging belly, the kicks of her baby, and the birthing process with its contractions and pain were all first-time experiences for any human mother. No wonder Eve said of Cain's birth, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD" (Genesis 4:1).

Time passed, and in the next verse we learn of a second pregnancy and birth. Now Adam and Eve have a family of four. In the second half of the same verse is a summary of their sons' professions. By verse 3, the boys are grown men, and in the following verses we read the tragic story of the first murder. Adam and Eve's oldest son killed his brother in an act of anger and jealousy. Can you imagine the shock, the sorrow, the questions, the hurt and pain?

Your answer to those questions may be, "Yes! I can imagine it. In fact, I've experienced something similar!" Let me encourage you: You are not alone. Your family is redeemable! There is good news for every family.

Gordon Wenham writes,

...The message of Genesis... is a story of grace triumphing despite human sin, of grace triumphing even in families broken by sin. The book starts on a high note with the

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5 It is important to point out that **childbirth** was not part of the curse. **Pain** in childbirth is the result of the curse, but childbirth itself has always been God's amazing plan for producing the next generation. Neither was **work** a curse, but rather the **difficulty** of the work was the curse. In fact, the other commands God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 indicate that we are made for work! Work is one of the ways we reflect God's image.

creation of the world climaxing with the creation of humankind in God's image and God declaring all that He had made was very good.... It is only in chapter 3 that things start to go wrong, with disobedience, [conflict], and death replacing obedience, harmony, and life. Things get worse in chapter 4... and reach their [lowest point in] chapter 6, where the earth is said to be full of violence (Genesis 6:11, 13).<sup>6</sup>

## BROKENNESS IN THE FAMILY OF ABRAHAM

Further in Genesis, we read of Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation (Genesis 11:27-25:11).<sup>7</sup> It was through Abraham's family that God would bring the Savior into the human family.

### Barrenness<sup>8</sup>

Genesis 11 lists the genealogy of Abram, who was a descendant of Noah's son Shem. Genesis 11:30 tells us that Abram's wife Sarai was not able to have children. That verse is a verse of tears, anguish, heartache, frustration, futility, anger, and grief for so many who read it. If you can put your name in place of Sarai's in this verse, know that you are not alone.

For those who would love to have children, but who are experiencing infertility, reading such passages as Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127:3-5 causes great pain and sorrow. It is natural to feel that childlessness is a punishment or a curse.

The truth is, you are not less important to God because you do not have children. You are not forgotten. Your barrenness does not mean that your family is a flawed family. Others have experienced this same deep sorrow.

How a couple works through infertility, both together and as individuals, is very important. Unwise choices can lead to further problems, as we will see in the lives of Abram and Sarai.

### Waiting for a Promise

Following the death of his father, Abram became the patriarch of his family. God promised to make Abram a great nation (Genesis 12:2) and promised to give Abram's descendants the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:7). Abram was now 75 years old (Genesis 12:4) and Sarai ten years younger (Genesis 17:17). Sarai was an unusually beautiful 65-year-old woman (Genesis 12:11), still barren, and already well past usual childbearing years.

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6 Gordon Wenham writing in *Family in the Bible*, edited by Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003, 29

7 God changed Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17:5, 15.

8 See Lesson 10 for more on this topic.



Years continued to pass, and still no child, though God's promise had been clearly renewed in Genesis 13:14-17. Abram seems to have given up on the possibility of fathering his own child, because in Genesis 15:2-3 he tells God that his servant is his heir. The Lord replied, "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:4). Then, God gave Abram a second picture promise of innumerable descendants, and Abram believed the Lord (Genesis 15:6).

Think of what these years of waiting must have been like for Sarai:

As painful as the judgment of others might have felt for Sarai, it was her own [sharp] disappointment that hurt the most. She probably longed not only for the fulfillment of being a mother but also for the honor and respect accorded to mothers in a society where women did not count for much otherwise. We know that male infertility can be the cause for the failure to conceive, but there was no such biological knowledge in Sarai's world. Sarai's identity as a woman, as someone of worth, depended on her producing and nursing babies. She did not gain value in men's eyes by being a righteous and faithful human being but by producing male heirs for her husband. An empty womb meant an empty life.<sup>9</sup>

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**God is working to make us like Jesus. Sometimes God makes us wait, because through the waiting time, he can do work in our hearts that is not possible otherwise.**

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## Human Solutions and Painful Results

When Abram was 85 years old, Sarai had an idea—a solution for how Abram could have a child. Sarai's female servant could be the birthmother of their child! (Genesis 16:1-4). But what Abram and Sarai had hoped would be a perfect solution destroyed the peace in their home when Hagar conceived. What had seemed so right had been so wrong. Their attempt to help God fulfill His promise only led to contention and discord. When people fail to trust God's plan and timing, broken relationships and hurt feelings are the natural consequences.

In the years that followed, tension, hurt, misunderstandings, communication problems, anger, abandonment, and despair multiplied (Genesis 16-21), not only in Abram and Sarai's household, but in that of the family of their nephew Lot.

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9 David and Diana Garland, *Flawed Families of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007, 21-22

## Flawed Families

Abram had been chosen by God to be the father of a great nation, the bloodline through which Jesus would be born! It seems like Abram was ruining God's plan, as were the other members of his family! Theirs was an example of a very flawed family.

By Genesis 49:33, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his wives had all died. Together with Jacob's children, they were a family of disastrous failures and flaws. Fighting, arguments, favoritism, deceit, abandonment, sibling rivalry, rape, and incest were all part of their family's story. None of those words describe a thriving, peaceful family!

Sadly, this story can be repeated throughout the Bible and throughout the world in the centuries since. Of course, even in these families there were times of joy, beautiful love stories, and even a few righteous men.

Through it all, God never abandoned his plan to redeem humanity. Nor did he change his purpose for family. If you continue reading through the Old Testament, you will discover a beautiful theme of redemption going through the story of the Hebrew family. Many events pointed ahead to Jesus. Abraham's offering of Isaac; the Pass-over and the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt; Rahab's deliverance from judgment and her inclusion in the people of God; and many other happenings beautifully illustrated the promise that a Savior would come and redeem humanity.

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**“God has holy reasons to wait while we are begging, as He did for Elizabeth (Luke 1:7, 13), and to go ahead before we are ready, as He did for Mary (Luke 1:34). As we obey and worship Him, He directs, educates, and provides for His plan which is never limited by what we cannot imagine.”**

**Adapted from  
Shauna Letellier**

*Remarkable Advent*

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## GOD'S HEALING AND GRACE IN FAMILIES

Ephesians 5 tells us that God designed marriage to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church. Just as Christ the head gives himself for the Church, so each husband, as head of his wife, is to give himself for her. Likewise, each wife is to follow the example of the Church. Just as the Church submits to Christ, each wife must submit to her husband.

The Fall of humanity marred God's original design for human families and brought destructive consequences to the marriage relationship. Every family faces the consequences of humanity's fall into sin. However,

Jesus came to redeem all things, including marriage. He came to redeem and restore all that sin has damaged and marred. Where we could not live out God's plan for marriage, Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's standards. Jesus loved the Church enough to die for her. He perfectly submitted to the plan of God the Father. Jesus is the complete and perfect fulfillment of God's design and of what our marriages fail to do: love and submit.<sup>10</sup>

» How is Jesus an example of the attitude a married person should have?

Jesus not only fulfills God's will in his own perfect submission and perfect love, but he enables husbands and wives to overcome the damaging tendencies that are natural to fallen humanity. By his grace, husbands and wives can fulfill God's design for marriage when they are living by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

No family is perfect, but God desires to redeem each family. God's grace can work in families enabling individuals to become what God originally intended for them to be. As individuals within families choose to obey God's instructions, their obedience helps to overcome some of the defects and deficiencies that are natural to every family. The consequences of the Fall that affect human relationships are lessened when we submit to God's will.

For example, as a godly husband obeys God's instructions to him in Ephesians 5, he overcomes his natural tendency to selfishly misuse his authority over his wife. His obedience to God brings healing as it lessens the harmful effects of the Fall. This obedience could possibly also motivate his wife to submit herself to him.

As a wife submits to her husband in obedience to God's instruction (Ephesians 5:24), she is overcoming her natural sinful tendency to resist her husband's authority. Her obedience to God is restorative, helping their relationship to be more like God intended marriage to be (1 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Peter 3:1-7).

Family relationships are very important to God. This is the reason God has given families instructions that bring healing and restoration.

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10 Christina Fox, "Redeeming Marriage." Retrieved from <https://cbmw.org/2013/08/29/redeeming-marriage/> on November 29, 2022.

## THE BIBLICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF FAMILY

### The Responsibilities of Parents and Grandparents

There are many passages throughout scripture that speak of the need for parents and grandparents to teach their children and grandchildren God's ways. We will briefly consider three.

- » A student should read Ephesians 6:4 for the group. What does this verse mean?

It is God's plan for parents to teach their children to know and obey God. The way that parents lead, instruct, correct, and train their children should reflect the way God does these things for his children.

- » A student should read Psalm 78:1-8 for the group. Answer the following questions:
  - How many generations of family are mentioned in this passage?
  - What is the responsibility of each generation?
  - What are the older generations to teach the younger generations?

Psalm 78 overflows with God's incredible grace and mercy. It tells of his work in the family of Israel from the time they left Egypt until the reign of King David. This Psalm should give readers hope for their family circumstances.

- » A student should read Deuteronomy 6:1-9 for the group. Looking at this passage, what are some things we as God's people are required to do?

This scripture is part of Moses' speech to the Israelites, just before they entered the Promised Land that God was giving them. They were learning how to be God's people and what it means to belong to God. The truths in these verses are still foundational for living as the people of God.

God commands us to obediently hear his Word—to do what he requires of us! (Verses 3-4).

We are required:

1. To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength (verse 5).
2. To keep God's Word in our own hearts (verse 6).
3. To diligently teach our children how to follow God's Word (verse 7).
4. To keep God's Word in our minds and in front of us constantly (verses 8-9).

Notice that these commands are for every generation (verse 2). God holds parents and grandparents responsible for teaching their children and grandchildren to live for him. For how long? All the days of their lives (verse 2). God tells us that parents must teach their

children his ways throughout the day, every day, everywhere they go, and in everything they do (verses 7-9).

The spiritual education of the children was the responsibility of the parent. The teaching would take place daily through the example of the parents as well as through the repetition of the Law. The importance of this command is seen by the extent to which parents were to go in order to teach their children. This was more than teaching the facts of the Law; it was to be the demonstration of a lifestyle woven into the tapestry of everyday life. Creativity was needed to teach the precepts of God while involved in mundane chores of the household.<sup>11</sup>

Parents must not only teach their children's minds, but also their hearts. They are to teach their children not only the facts about God, but also the practical application of how to live in relationship with God and in obedience to him. Parents teach their children with verbal instruction and with life examples. Both are essential.

This passage may seem simple, but it is so important. These truths and commandments provide purpose and direction for individuals and for families. As parents continually seek to know God better and to fully obey him in all things, they teach their children to do the same. Parents should have a lifelong attitude of learning and obeying. This is an example to their children, and it gives their children a hunger for God.

- » What are some practical ways parents can disciple their children every day?

## Family—Training Ground for Loving Others

- » A student should read 1 John 4:7-13, 19 for the group.

The theme of this passage is love. To know God in the richness of who He is, we must love one another. *One another* includes our family. One of the reasons God gave us family is so that we can learn how to love others. As we learn to show love to our family members (even when it is difficult), we become more like God—because God is love! (Verse 8).

When family members—whether spiritual or physical—love each other, they prove that they are born of God (verse 7). As they love each other, God's love is perfected in them (verse 12).

God does not just require us to love others, he first loved us (verses 9-11, 19). He loved us by sending Jesus to be the satisfaction for our sins (verse 10). God's love for us is the motivation for our love for others (verse 11).

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11 The Woman's Study Bible, Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1995, 292

Loving our family may be easy for some and extremely difficult for others, but all of us can have what we need to obey God's command—God abiding in us through the Holy Spirit (verses 12-13).

God calls us to love one another, including our parents, spouses, and children. Loving our family does not mean approving wrong or evil. It does not mean that we do not require accountability. It means that we want what is best for our family members and are willing to give of ourselves for their good.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » In your own words, explain some of the ways that marriage reflects the relationships in the Trinity.
- » Tell about how God healed a marriage damaged by sin.
- » Explain why obedience to God heals and restores what has been damaged by sin.

## PRAYER

Take a moment to pray and thank God for your family. Pray for your family. Pray about hurts and failures, celebrations and joys. Personalize the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, making them into a prayer of submission and supplication.

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Memorize Deuteronomy 6:4-9. At the beginning of the next class, write or recite the passage from memory.
2. In Deuteronomy 6:1-9, God requires four things of us. Prayerfully and honestly evaluate yourself in each of these four areas.

We are required:

- To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength (verse 5).
- To keep God's Word in our own hearts (verse 6).
- To diligently teach our children to follow God's Word (verse 7).
- To keep God's Word in our minds and in front of us constantly (verses 8-9).

Write a personal paragraph prayer about each. (You are not required to share this writing with your class leader but should report that you did the assignment.)

3. From the lives of Abraham and Sarah we learn about extended times of waiting. Think about these questions:
  - When have you needed to wait for God's timing? What did you learn from these times of waiting?
  - How well do you trust the promises of God's Word? Are you struggling with a promise right now? Is that struggle impacting your family? How?
  - Have you ever tried to work something out for yourself or for your family without trusting God? What were the results?
  - How does impatience and lack of faith negatively impact families?

Write a total of three paragraphs in response to this topic. (You are not required to share this writing with your class leader but should report that you did the assignment.)

## LESSON 3

# THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Commit to God's design and purposes for marriage.
2. Commit to personal obedience to God's principles for Christian marriage.
3. Be equipped to teach others about biblical marriage.

### ROBERTSON MCQUILKIN, A PROMISE KEEPER

Dr. Robertson McQuilkin served as a missionary in Japan for 12 years. He later became president of Columbia International University. He was well known as a writer, speaker, and educator. His wife Muriel suffered from a brain disease that affects a person's ability to think, remember, and communicate. When the disease progressed to the condition where Muriel needed constant care, Dr. McQuilkin resigned from the presidency of the university to take care of his wife. He said he was keeping the promise that he made to her when they married. He believed that caring for his wife was more important than keeping the position of university president.

### GOD'S INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Marriage was instituted by God for the first man and woman he created. Marriage was designed by God to be exactly what people needed. It was designed exactly for human nature. In everything God designs and in everything he requires, he always wants what is best for us (Deuteronomy 6:24). God intended that his plan for marriage provide each spouse with the best emotional, relational, and spiritual well-being.



God said that in marriage a man and woman leave their parents and join together. Marriage puts two people into a friendship and partnership that is stronger and closer than any other human relationship. Marriage is not just two people together in a limited partnership. Their lives have been merged so that in a sense they are like one person. This is not an obliteration of their individual personalities, but a special unity.

## BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

Biblical marriage is a beautiful thing. But couples who want to experience its beauty and taste its goodness must examine what the scriptures teach about it, and then pursue obedience to what they learn. A satisfying marriage requires effort and sacrifice.

### Biblical Marriage is for Fellowship

Genesis describes God's creation of marriage. Every part of the description gives dignity to marriage.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18).

Just as God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in fellowship, God designed us to be social. We were made for conversation. We were created for intimacy and fellowship. God said that being alone is not good!

God took a rib from the man and made it into a beautiful woman, another person—equally made in God's image, equal in value, but different in design—who completed the man. She "is brought with special honor to the man as the Creator's last and most perfect work."<sup>12</sup>

### Marriage is to be a joyful union.

When Adam said, "This at last is bone of my bones" (Genesis 2:23) he was expressing respect and delight. Adam didn't say, "Finally, a slave! Now I have someone to do my laundry, cook my food, massage my back, and do my chores!" No, Adam said, "At last, a helper who completes me!"

### Marriage is to be a union of equals.

...a helper fit for him (Genesis 2:18).

God designed woman to perfectly match and complete man.

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12 Charles Ellicot, ed., *Ellicot's Commentary for English Readers*. (Notes on Genesis 2:22). Retrieved from <https://biblehub.com/genesis/2-22.htm#commentary> on December 29, 2020.

Matthew Henry reminds us, “The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”<sup>13</sup> Woman was neither inferior nor superior to man, but was comparable to him.

### Marriage is to be a covenant union.

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).

Strong marriages don’t depend upon constant romantic feelings (feelings are not constant), or pleasure, (though healthy marriages bring joy), or personal fulfillment (though strong marriages are fulfilling). The wonderful benefits of marriage do not *cause* a strong marriage; they are the *result* of a strong marriage. Marriage is established on the unshakable foundation of covenant—one man and one woman exclusively committed to one another for life.

Marriage is to be a transparent, trusting, accepting relationship—”And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). Because sin had not yet corrupted the innocence of the first couple, their marriage was without judgment, without shame, and without fear. The New Testament tells us, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled” (Hebrews 13:4).

A strong marriage does not exist where there is insecurity, distrust, suspicion, or fear, where spouses are not sure of one another’s commitment to the marriage. Strong marriages require a promise that ends only when one spouse dies (Romans 7:1-2).

God’s intention is that marriage be a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:3-6). Paul said that believers are not under bondage when their unbelieving spouses separate from them (1 Corinthians 7:15), but a believer should not seek separation from an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12-14, 16). Paul had previously written that the Lord said the same: believers are not to choose to leave/separate from their spouses, but if they do, they must not marry someone else (1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 19:9).

Covenant love is self-giving, respectful, and beautifying even when the relationship is difficult (1 Corinthians 13). Weak commitment produces tentative effort, emotional disconnection, withdrawal, and temptation.

A husband is living out covenantal love when he never gives up on his bride even when she is unresponsive or disrespectful or sick. A wife is living out covenantal love when she

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13 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*. (Notes on Genesis 2:21-25). Retrieved from <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/mhm/genesis-2.html> on July 31, 2023.

chooses to respect and obey her husband, for Christ's sake, even when her husband isn't loving her.

His love wins her respect, and her respect wins his love. And they continue to grow!

- » What problems result if people marry while thinking that they can change their decision later if they are unhappy with the marriage? What difference does total commitment make when a person believes that his marriage is permanent?

## **Biblical Marriage is the Place for Sexual Fulfillment and Procreation**

God made sex fully enjoyable and uniquely powerful. It is an act intended to bring oneness physically, emotionally, and spiritually. A healthy sex life is not only exhilarating and brings oneness, it nourishes the marriage relationship. For those who want to follow the biblical sexual ethic, sex is a gift of God given to be fully enjoyed within marriage.<sup>14</sup>

- » Students should read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 and Hebrews 13:4 for the group.

The verses in 1 Corinthians tell us that one purpose of marriage is to satisfy sexual desires. The husband and wife have given themselves to each other and have given up their claim of ownership of their own bodies. That means that a married person should not expect to engage in sex only when he chooses but should also be responsive to the desires of the spouse. The verses do not tell us that a person can demand satisfaction against the will of the spouse. Instead, the verses are telling each to be responsive to the needs of the other.

This passage tells us that married people should not deprive each other of this privilege. A short time of sexual abstinence along with fasting is legitimate, but prolonged separation will cause temptation because of unsatisfied desires. Sometimes couples choose to be separated for several months or longer because one goes to work or study in a distant place. Before making such a decision, they should consider whether or not such a plan fits the plan of God. They may suffer problems because of the long separation.

Some people prefer to follow a lifestyle that does not include children, but the Bible teaches that God is pleased when parents have godly children (Malachi 2:15). It's important to note that it is not reproduction alone that God wants, but *godly* children. Parents are called by God to teach their children to follow Christ.

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14 "Spiritual Health and Porn Addiction," retrieved from <https://thefreedomfight.org/health/porn-addiction-and-spiritual-health/> on July 31, 2023.

## Biblical Marriage is for Christ

- » Students should read 1 Peter 3:1-7 and Ephesians 5:22-33 for the group. The group should keep these passages open for examination during this discussion.

In Ephesians 5:30-32, the Holy Spirit reveals the deeper meaning of marriage, hidden until Jesus came. Marriage is an earthly picture—a reflection—of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his church.

Paul begins this section by exhorting believers to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). It is in this context that he offers the following instruction on marriage.

**The Spirit-filled bride** will *submit* to her groom (her “head”) in the Lord, in the same way that believers submit to Jesus (Ephesians 5:24, 32; see also 1 Peter 3:1). This is the way she shows respect to Jesus and to her husband. The wife is supposed to accept the leadership of her husband even if the husband is not a believer. If she does this, her unsaved husband is more likely to become a believer.

It is important for every wife to have the Lord in mind in her submission. It is to him and for him that she submits and not just for her husband. Her eye is on Jesus, who alone is without fault. A wife’s willing submission to her husband is an act of worship to Jesus.

Biblical submission, like love, cannot be forced. Biblical submission is a gift which wives offer their husbands out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:22-24). Submission in everything is an act of worship to Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The submission of a wife to her husband is an act of respect (Ephesians 5:33) for him, as part of the Spirit-filled life (Ephesians 5:18-21). This honor coming from a gentle and quiet spirit is very precious in the sight of God (1 Peter 3:4).

**The Spirit-filled groom** will *love* his bride as Jesus loves his church (Ephesians 5:25). The groom must love her as he loves his own body (Ephesians 5:28-29). He must manifest the same Spirit-filled self-sacrifice as Jesus manifested toward his church when he gave Himself up for her. This is his act of submission to God (Ephesians 5:21). One commentator put it like this:

As he (Jesus) gave himself to suffer on the cross to save the church, so we are to be willing to deny ourselves and to bear [hard work and difficulties], that we may promote the happiness of the wife. It is the duty of the husband to [work diligently] for her support; to provide for her needs; to deny himself of rest and ease, if necessary, in order to attend on her in sickness; to go before her in danger; to defend her if she

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15 For further exploration of the topic of biblical submission, see Lesson 10 of *Spiritual Formation*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.

is in [a dangerous situation]; to bear with her when she is irritable; to cling to her when she is pushing him away; to pray with her when she is in spiritual trouble; and to be ready to die to save her. Why should this not be? If they are shipwrecked, and there is a single plank on which safety can be secured, should he not be willing to place her on that, and see her safe at all hazards to himself? But there is more... a husband should feel that it should be the one great object of his life to seek the salvation of his wife. He is to furnish her all that she may need for her soul... And he is to set the example; to counsel her if she needs counsel; and to make the path of salvation as easy for her as possible. If a husband has the Spirit and self-denial of the Savior, he will regard no sacrifice too great if he may promote the salvation of his family.<sup>16</sup>

The groom is to seek the purity of his bride just as Christ purified his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:26-27).

1 Peter 3:7 says that a husband should live with his wife in an understanding way, meaning that he is to do his best to understand her. He should study her in order to understand her needs. The woman is called “the weaker vessel” in this verse. A wife needs consideration from her husband. He should protect her not only from physical harm but also from worry and emotional stress.

The husband is to provide every means necessary for the flourishing of his wife: faithfulness, unconditional love, understanding, prayer, counsel, teaching, and kindness.

When the husband treats his wife with such love, he will be repaid with happiness. Paul says, “He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28). Husbands who love their wives in this self-sacrificing way will be more than repaid by the Lord, and most likely by the respect, affection, and faithfulness of his wife.

» What are specific things a husband should do to provide spiritual support to his wife?

It is important to remember how the commands in these verses are given. The husband is not told to enforce authority over his wife. The wife is told to obey her husband, but the husband is not told to make her obey. He is told to love his wife and sacrifice as necessary to take care of her. Likewise, the wife is not told to demand care from her husband; she is told to respect him.

The priority of the husband should not be to maintain his authority but to provide loving care. The priority of the wife should not be to demand care for herself but to respect her husband.

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16 Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible*. (Notes on Ephesians 5:25). Retrieved from <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/bnb/ephesians-5.html> on July 31, 2023.

Apostle Peter warns the husband that his prayers will be hindered if he does not care for his wife properly. From the words of Paul and Peter we can see that a man who does not care for his wife as he should does not love God as he should. A woman who does not respect her husband does not respect God as she should. **Our behavior in marriage affects our relationship with God.**

## THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE

God designed marriage to be permanent. In marriage, a man and woman promise to be faithful to each other for as long as both are alive.

The Bible records Jesus' words about marriage, spoken in a conversation with the Pharisees.

» A student should read Matthew 19:3-8 for the group.

Jesus said that God intended marriage to be permanent. He said that divorce was instituted for people who are not following God.

There are many reasons that God designed marriage to be permanent, some of which we talked about in the last section. Another reason marriage is to be permanent is for the sake of children. Obedience to God's plan for marriage creates the very best environment in which to raise children. As parents honor God by obeying his principles in their marriage and family, they will be able to raise godly children (Malachi 2:15).

God designed human life in such a way that children take several years to grow to adulthood. During this time, children are dependent on parents for protection, provision, and training. This is different from animals that grow to maturity in a year or two. People need more time to develop mature character. God designed the family as the means of raising children. Many of the problems in society come from a lack of families that have faithful parents.

Marriage requires people to make a promise committing their whole lives to each other. Every culture has forms and a ceremony to show that marriage is a serious commitment. The ceremony is a way for the man and woman to state publicly that they are making this lifelong commitment.

Most governments maintain records of marriages. Laws about marriage affect the ownership of property, the custody of children, and inheritance.

Here is an example of wedding vows that have been used for many weddings:

I take you to be my wedded [husband/wife], to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge myself to you.

Romantic feelings will not be constant all of the time. A marriage cannot be based on personal feelings that are changeable. Marriage vows mean that a man and woman are promising to be faithful to each other as long as they both live, and that promise does not depend on any conditions.

Because of the permanence of marriage, Christians should never make statements that imply that they are willing to end their marriage because of relationship problems. A person should not say, “I wish I had not married you,” or “Maybe we should divorce.” Sometimes those statements are an attempt to manipulate the other person to show that he cares about the marriage. A person thinks that the other might try harder to please the spouse because of the harsh statement, but that rarely happens. Instead, the other person defends himself by saying, “Ok, we can divorce if you want to.” Then both have implied that they are willing to end the marriage because of their own desires, and the relationship is only worse.

- » Why does a marriage begin with vows and not just a statement of love?
- » Would someone like to share about how he/she entered marriage expecting benefits but not realizing the commitment necessary?

## MARRIAGE AS CHRISTIAN PARTNERSHIP

- » A student should read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 for the group.

These verses tell us that a believer’s commitment is hindered if he is too closely connected to unbelievers. Just as a believer cannot worship with a person who worships Satan, he cannot follow the lifestyle and priorities of unbelievers. The warning could apply to various kinds of relationships, including business partnerships.

Marriage is the closest human partnership. A believer should not even consider marrying someone who is not a committed believer (1 Corinthians 7:39). A believer married to an unbeliever will experience much sorrow and many hindrances in raising children and making lifestyle decisions.

If husband and wife are both believers but come from different churches, they must make sure they are in agreement about important spiritual issues. They should plan to be part of the same local church after they are married.

## WAYS COUPLES CAN STRENGTHEN THEIR MARRIAGE

### 1. They must celebrate God's original design and appreciate their unique roles within the marriage.

A husband must remember that his wife is a gift from God, a helper who completes him. He must lay down his life for her security and her spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. He must choose to have gratitude for her and love her even when she is least deserving, realizing that only God can change what needs to change in her. God will honor his obedience and faith.

A wife must honor God's choice of her husband as her head, show him respect in every way she can, and honor his leadership. She must choose submission and respect even when he makes mistakes and is least deserving, praying that God will change what needs to change in him. God will honor her obedience and faith.

### 2. Married couples must cultivate true spiritual and physical intimacy.

They must seek to *know* each other without fear, criticism, comparison to others, abuse, selfish lust, or degradation. They must live with transparency and integrity before God and one another.

### 3. Married couples must follow the example of God's grace when they fail to measure up.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin and felt shame and regret, God revealed his power to redeem their failures. God sacrificed an animal to make coats for Adam and Eve for the covering of their nakedness (Genesis 3:21). This loving act of God was a picture of grace and of God's promise of redemption through Christ. Christ enables us to be forgiven and restored. Through Christ, married couples can return to intimacy without shame even after they have failed.

## CONCLUSION

Marriage is God's creation, not man's. Therefore, we must go to God for instruction, not to the world or culture. He alone knows how to make our marriages strong, enduring, and rewarding. But we will never be the spouses we ought to be without the Holy Spirit!



## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What is a truth about marriage that many people seem to forget?
- » Explain the principles that the church should teach in order to strengthen marriages. What understanding is especially lacking in your environment?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving us the wonderful gift of marriage. Thank you for the beautiful way you designed it. Help us to make the commitment necessary for us to experience marriage the way you planned.

Help us demonstrate a love that is like the love between Christ and the church.

Help us go beyond the assumptions of our culture in our respect for one another.

Thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit that makes joyful, strong relationships possible.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Choose two principles that were new to you from this lesson. Write a paragraph explaining each of them in your own words.
2. Prepare a brief presentation on one of the topics listed below. (The class leader will assign a topic to each student.) Share the presentation at the beginning of the next class time.
  - God's design of union in marriage
  - Biblical purposes for marriage
  - God-given roles in marriage and the importance of being filled with the Spirit in order to fulfill those roles
  - The permanence of marriage
3. If you are unmarried, but plan to marry in the future, write two paragraphs of commitment to obeying God's principles for your future marriage. If you are married, write two paragraphs of commitment to obeying God's principles for your marriage.

## RESPECT FOR WOMEN

Before continuing to Lesson 4, the class should **study and discuss Appendix A**. This is a brief discussion of respect for women, an important topic related to marriage and family.



## LESSON 4

# ISSUES OF SEXUALITY

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Describe how the Fall affected human nature and sexual desires.
2. Explain personal identity and how it relates to personal ethics.
3. Embrace a biblical perspective towards human sexuality and sexual immorality.
4. Find freedom from sin and experience victory during temptation to immorality.
5. Be equipped to minister to others who need help and victory.

### CHRISTOPHER YUAN

Christopher grew up in an Asian-American family in the United States. From the time that he was an adolescent he felt attracted to men instead of women. His parents were shocked and ashamed of their son's interest. As a young adult he was in a series of relationships with men. He hoped to find real love and commitment, but each relationship eventually failed. He began to carelessly have immoral relations with many men. Everything began to change for Christopher when his mother became a believer and showed him love and acceptance that he had never experienced before. He began to realize that his primary identity is a person in God's image. He repented and submitted all of the aspects of his life to God. He found fulfillment and purpose in his relationship with God.

## FALLEN HUMAN NATURE AND SINFUL DESIRES

When God created Adam and Eve, he made them perfect in every way, without defect or deficiency (Genesis 1:31). Their natures only desired what was right and good. Their minds and bodies functioned perfectly. Then Adam chose to disobey God's commandment. When he did, human nature became corrupted (Romans 8:20-23). Human bodies and minds were affected. Even the healthiest, most intelligent person is affected by sin's results. Sin permanently damaged what had been perfect. None of Creation will be fully healed until Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15).

With the damage that has been done to our human nature and physical bodies, we should not expect that our bodies' natural desires will always be right and in balance. The fact is that many of our desires are out of balance. People naturally desire what is wrong. Jesus observed the natural sinfulness of humanity when he listed all kinds of sins that come from the heart (Mark 7:21-22).

In this lesson, we are talking about issues of sexuality. Of all human desires, sexual desires can be the most powerful.

Wrong sexual desires seem natural to the person who feels them. He may think that he should not be blamed for acting out his desires. However, every person has to resist his natural inclinations in order to do right. A person may have the natural inclination to lie or steal, or be violent, lazy, or impatient. People are not responsible for being born in a defective condition, but people are guilty when they follow natural desires and commit sin.

Sometimes childhood abuse or other environmental conditions cause a person to struggle with homosexual impulses or other wrong sexual urges. However, wrong sexual desires should not be considered different from other sinful desires. The person needs the same grace for deliverance and cleansing from God, whatever causes were involved.

The fact that wrong desires feel normal to some people should not be surprising. Sin in general feels normal and natural to the person who experiences the desire for sin.

We are by nature the children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). That means we are naturally inclined to sin, and we bring ourselves into condemnation by committing the sin that is natural to us. The fact that a person is born with a particular sinful inclination does not mean that it should be followed, even if it seems normal for him.

» Why shouldn't we obey all of our natural desires?

The Bible tells us we are called to be conformed to Christ (Romans 8:29). We are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Our fleshly desires are not to become the basis of life. Instead, we must submit wrong impulses to God's authority (Romans 13:14).

- » What does it look like to submit our wrong impulses to God's authority?

Your sexual desires should be submitted to your ultimate purpose, to glorify God by showing the image of God. A life of following Christ is a life that is consistent with the image of God that you have.

## HUMAN IDENTITY

### A Right Understanding of Human Identity

Many people incorrectly believe that their human nature can be trusted to lead them in the right way. It seems reasonable to them that the desires that come from their own nature should lead them to satisfaction. They do not realize that their nature cannot be trusted because it is damaged by sin. A person's natural desires will not lead him to satisfaction because his desires are distorted. Neither will a person's natural desires, apart from God, lead him to do what is right morally.

People believe they should follow their own desires and emotions to create their own purpose for life. They believe it is important to have a personal identity that is not defined or limited by any authority or moral requirements. They think individuals must decide what is right and valuable for themselves. They trust their own natures to direct them in the right way. They do not like institutions or rules that limit their behavior. Corrupt human nature becomes the standard for ethics in place of God's Word.

Because sexuality is a powerful part of human nature, many people consider sexual desires to be central to their identity. They think they must follow their sexual desires in order to truly be themselves. People think that sexuality is not just what they **want** or **do**, it is who they **are**. They make it their identity.

In contrast to the world's thinking, **the Bible tells us that we are created in the image of God, designed for the purpose of relationship with God. This is our true identity as humans.**

Nothing in our earthly existence can give us our ultimate, true identity. The characteristics of our earthly existence are simply the conditions we are in right now. They do not make us who we are. Our ethnicity, social status, or economic status are not our **identity**, they are our **condition**. A person may be a doctor, an entertainment star, or a national leader, but that person stands before God as God's creature in God's image, and that identity is the most important.

Our sexuality is a powerful part of our condition. We have sexual inclinations, desires, and frustrations. But those things are not our identity; they are part of our condition.

We are born with a sinful nature because the sin of Adam separated humanity from God (Romans 5:18). But even our sinfulness is not our identity; it is our condition, and it can be changed by God's grace and power (Romans 5:19).

- » What is the difference between a person's *identity* and a person's *condition*?

## Human Identity and Personal Ethics

Identity is important because a person bases his ethics on his identity. Ethics are the principles that identify behavior as right or wrong. If a person thinks his sexuality is his identity, then he will believe it is *right* to follow his sexual inclinations.

Sometimes a person says, "I was born like this; it is natural for me to do this; therefore, it is not wrong for me." But the Bible teaches that we were all born with a sinful nature (Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:3). It is not right for us to follow our sinful nature just because it seems natural to us.

Our sinful nature is not who we are. Our sinful nature is our condition. Our sexuality is not our identity. Instead, creatures made in God's image is our identity. If we acknowledge this reality, we realize that God decides what is right and what is wrong, and that we are accountable to him. Our identity helps us understand the right standard of holy behavior.

- » How does a person's understanding of his identity affect his ethics?

## A Right Understanding of Gender

We are familiar with the fact that humans and many animals are separated into male and female. We could assume that God also is male or female, but that would be wrong. God is a being with a nature greater than gender, existing before gender existed. Both human genders came from the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Both human genders are expressions of the image of God.

The image of God is not just something that is included as a part of human nature. The image of God is not only certain characteristics given to us such as the ability to love, appreciation of beauty, and an understanding of right and wrong. The entire human nature is a reflection of God's image. Nothing but the image of God can be considered the essence of our being. We are primarily creatures in God's image. No detail of our human condition should be allowed to become our primary identity or the basis of our ethics.

God's choice of gender for each person is part of his plan of how that person will show the image of God. Some people refuse to accept the gender God gave them. They may try to live as a person of the opposite gender. Some people even try to change their physical body with surgeries. This is a tragic damage of God's creation, because a person cannot truly

change gender by changing the physical body. Each person is male or female throughout the person's nature – not just physically. God wants us to glorify him and reflect his image in the gender he gave to each of us.

## GOD'S MORAL STANDARD

- » A student should read Hebrews 13:4 for the group.

This verse tells us that marriage is supposed to be highly respected. Sexual sin is a disrespect of marriage. God will judge sexual immorality.

- » A student should read 1 Corinthians 6:18 for the group.

Sexual sins include lustful fantasies, fornication, adultery, incest, rape, child molesting, homosexual activity, and use of pornography.

- **Lustful fantasies:** Willingly imagining sexual activity with anyone who is not your spouse.
- **Fornication:** Sexual activity between people who are not married.
- **Adultery:** Sexual activity that includes a person who is married to someone else.
- **Incest:** Sexual activity with a close relative who is not your spouse.
- **Rape:** Sexual abuse, forcing someone into sexual activity against their will.
- **Child Molesting:** Sexual activity with a person who does not have the maturity to make such a decision or to manage sexual desires.
- **Homosexual activity:** Sexual activity between people of the same gender.
- **Pornography:** Writing, pictures, and videos designed to cause sexual reactions by showing nudity or sexual activity.

All of these are violations of the marriage relationship.

Remember—every hunger that entices us in the flesh is an exploitation of a need that can be better met by God. The only context for godly sex is marital sex. Illicit sex is... immediately sweet, but something that will poison our spiritual appetite until we crave that which will ultimately destroy us. Illicit sex will do nothing but diminish our sensitivity to holiness, righteousness, and God's presence in our lives.<sup>17</sup>

In many passages, Proverbs warns that sexual immorality destroys a person's life and leads to death (Proverbs 2:16-19 and Proverbs 6:24-29, 32-33 for example).

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17 Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 210.



Robertson McQuilkin writes that

[God's purposes for human sexuality] are violated mentally almost as severely as they would be by the act itself. He did not simply create male and female; he created them for one another in an intimate, permanent bond of marriage, a oneness patterned after his own nature. For this high purpose to be fulfilled, the intimacy must be exclusive and the commitment permanent or it is no oneness. Faithfulness is most importantly of the mind. Exclusive intimacy, permanent commitment, and mutual trust are violated first in the mind.<sup>18</sup>

» Students should read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 15-20 and Matthew 5:27-30 for the group.

Every society has cultural views of relationships between men and women. These cultural views have lower standards than the standards of biblical morality. Many cultures have only the rules necessary for maintaining an orderly society. They tolerate sexual sin if it is managed carefully enough to avoid bad consequences or scandal. The biblical standard of morality is different.

Sadly, some churches follow the morality of their culture instead of the morality of the Bible. They punish people whose sins have become obvious and careless, but they tolerate the same sins by people who are more careful to hide their sin or manage its consequences.

These verses tell us that people who are committing these sins are not believers and will not go to heaven. Some of the Corinthian believers had committed these sins in the past but had been saved from them.

Any doctrine that excuses any of these sins for a person who professes to be a believer is a false doctrine. If a person claims to be a follower of Christ yet commits sexual sin, the church is required by scripture to remove him from the church and not consider him a believer (1 Corinthians 5:11-13).

Church leaders should set a good example of behavior. When a church allows worship leaders to dress immodestly or allows sensual forms of dance in the church, they imply that wrong sexual desires are normal. They imply that sexual sin is not serious.

The dress styles of a society may imply that a person is not well-dressed without physical exposure to cause sexual attraction. Church members sometimes fall into this error, especially for special occasions. They think they are not well-dressed unless they follow the fashion of their society. The church must teach that this is wrong. A believer should not want to cause wrong desires in others. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 tells us that believers should dress

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18 Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995), 216.

and act in such a way that anyone who sees them knows they are living careful, pure lives and are unwilling to sin or tempt others to sin.

## PORNOGRAPHY

Pornography is writing, pictures, or videos designed to cause sexual reactions by showing nudity or sexual activity.

The internet is making pornography easily available around the world. Many older pastors and leaders did not face the same temptations because the internet was not available when they were young. They may barely understand what the younger generation is facing. But people must be taught to apply biblical principles to choices of entertainment.

**Pornography is wrong** because it is designed to cause a person to imagine actions of fornication, adultery, and many forms of sexual perversion. It is attractive to a person who has sinful desires. Pornography invites and enables a person to participate in immoral actions that God condemns. Jesus said that choosing to imagine these things is sinful (Matthew 5:28).

Pornography is also wrong because it devalues people and relationships. It reduces sex to a selfish activity. It treats people like objects to use for personal pleasure instead of valuing people as made in God's image, designed for healthy relationships.

**Pornography is addictive.** Pornography, like sin in general, is enslaving (John 8:24, 2 Peter 2:19). The person who uses pornography feels a strong need for it. He can hardly imagine living without it. It seems to him that life would be empty and uninteresting without the imaginations he gets from pornography. Like every other addiction, the desire becomes consuming, and the user begins to sacrifice the good things in his life.

**Pornography is progressive.** The user needs material that is increasingly explicit and perverted. He will begin to take delight in imaginations that would have disgusted and horrified him before.

**Pornography is damaging.** The user becomes less capable of enjoying a normal relationship. His desires become so unnatural that they can never be satisfied. He becomes insensitive to the abuse of others and is willing for others to suffer for his pleasure.

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**“Satan wants to ‘steal, kill and destroy’ (John 10:10) your sexual satisfaction, and porn is his tool of choice. Pornography promises sexual fulfillment, but actually takes away our ability to enjoy the real thing.”**

**The Freedom Fight**

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## Some Effects of Pornography

Imagining the actions depicted in pornography affects viewers' minds and bodies as if they were physically doing the actions themselves.

Pornography presents unrealistic situations that cause the brain to have stronger pleasure responses than it would have in any natural sexual encounter.<sup>19</sup> The brain adapts to this unnaturally high level of pleasure chemicals. Because of this, the brain continually demands increasing amounts of pornography, and increasingly perverse pornography so that viewers can continue to feel pleasure. The chemical changes in the brain can eventually lead to a person being physically incapable of having or enjoying a natural, real-life sexual experience. The part of the brain that enables us to make decisions is also damaged because of the presence of too much of the pleasure chemical.

God designed sexual experiences to be bonding for relationships. A hormone released in the brain during a sexual experience emotionally bonds participants to each other, strengthening their relationship. This is a wonderful gift within marriage. However, watching pornography emotionally bonds a viewer to pornography itself.

The guilt and shame of pornography usage isolates people, keeping them from being able to connect with other people in healthy relationships. It also destroys trust within a marriage relationship.

Because it causes chemical imbalances in the brain, pornography usage can lead to mental depression for the viewer.

The scenes depicted in pornography sometimes lead to violence and abuse within real-life sexual relationships.

Pastors and parents must warn young people of the dangers of pornography. Parents should not give their children unrestricted access to the internet when they lack the maturity to resist temptation. Anyone who struggles with the temptation to use pornography should regularly give a report of victories or failures to a trusted, godly person. Regular checkups with a mature believer can help the struggling person to maintain a commitment to purity and gain consistent victory.

- » What practices should you recommend to people to help protect them from the addiction of pornography? How can the church help?

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19 All of the information in this paragraph and the next four paragraphs is adapted from <https://thefreedomfight.org>, a recommended Bible-based resource for those who want to be set free from the bondage of pornography usage.

## MOLESTATION OF CHILDREN/RAPE

Child molestation is having sexual activity with a child. It is a perversion of sex. It is evil for many reasons, including:

- It defies God's good intentions for sexuality within covenant marriage (Hebrews 13:4).
- It steals the child's innocence – the child now has experience with things they shouldn't know yet.
- It robs the child of virginity (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7).
- It gives the child a false sense of guilt; the child is in a wrong activity but is not able or allowed to make a real choice.
- It causes the child to make decisions about sexuality that he does not yet have the maturity to make.
- It makes children more likely to choose immoral behavior in the future because they feel dirty or worthless (Matthew 18:6).
- It increases temptation for the child to engage in perverted or abusive activity in the future.
- It abuses those who are vulnerable and cannot defend themselves.
- It injures someone made in God's image, who has infinite worth (Genesis 1:27).

Child molestation sometimes happens in families and among friends. It may not be suspected because family members and friends are trusted, and the child is afraid to tell anyone about what has happened.

Rape is physically forcing a person (whether child or adult) to do sexual activity without their consent. Rape is evil for many of the same reasons that child molesting is evil (Deuteronomy 22:25-27).

Another form of sexual abuse is sex trafficking. All over the world, children and young people are kidnapped by strangers or sold by family members and used for prostitution or for making pornography. Families in poverty sometimes fail to protect their children from this evil business because they feel desperate for money. Someone makes profit, but the children are not only harmed physically but terribly damaged mentally and emotionally. This is sinful oppression of the poor and vulnerable that God will judge (Proverbs 14:31).

These sins against children break God's heart (Matthew 18:10-14, Psalm 146:7-9). Those who do these sins will not get by without punishment (1 Thessalonians 4:6, Ezekiel 7:8-9). Believers ought to share the love and compassion of God's heart and work to defend, rescue, and heal those who are enslaved (Proverbs 24:11-12, Job 29:12-16, Psalm 72:12-14).

## SELF-SEX

To masturbate is to stimulate one's own genitals for sexual pleasure or to relieve sexual tension.

The Bible does not specifically condemn masturbation itself as immoral. However, self-sex may lead to lustful thinking, pornography use, and fornication, all of which are sinful (Matthew 5:27-28, Matthew 15:19-20).

Masturbation is unwise also because it is addictive: the more you do it, the more you feel like you have to do it.

Compulsive masturbation sometimes points to a deeper issue, such as emotional or relational problems, or past sexual abuse.

- » Students should read 1 Corinthians 6:12-13, 18-20 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 for the group.

God designed physical oneness in marriage to help unite a husband and wife emotionally and spiritually (1 Corinthians 6:16-20, Malachi 2:15).

Many... assume that masturbation can help them deal with being single until they get married. They fail to realize, however, that when the practice becomes habitual, it may threaten the beauty and intimacy of marital sex in the future.

Self-sex provides a sexual experience that misses the essential purpose of sex: the joining of two to become one flesh, physically and emotionally.... Masturbation should not be used as a substitute for healthy, normal sexual activity in marriage.<sup>20</sup>

What should an unmarried person do if masturbation is a problem in their life? Even if someone is masturbating only for the purpose of relieving sexual tension, it is still best to avoid it, because of the temptations that are present and because self-sex does not accomplish God's purposes for sexuality.

If there is any kind of immorality in their life, they must confess and forsake that sin. They should regularly and frequently give account of victories and failures to a godly older mentor who will pray for and advise them.

If the masturbation is the result of emotional or relational problems or past sexual abuse, getting counseling from a professional Christian counselor is appropriate.

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20 Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Diane Langberg, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Counseling Women*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 185.

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY

God designed marriage to be a lifelong, committed relationship between a man and a woman. God saw that Adam needed a helper (Genesis 2:18). The word for helper means someone who corresponds to another, being a helper by being different in helpful ways. God created a woman and not another man to be Adam's helper (Genesis 2:22). The conclusion of the creation story gives the general principle of marriage for all humanity – in marriage, a man and woman become one in a unique way (Genesis 2:24).

Jesus spoke about God's design of marriage (Matthew 19:4-6). He referred to the passage in Genesis and stated that a man and woman come together to become one in a unique, permanent relationship.

The Apostle Paul made many statements about marriage. He said that marriage is an illustration that teaches us about the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Throughout the passage in Ephesians, he made statements about the relationship between men and their wives. He quoted the statement from Genesis and Matthew about the special relationship between a man and his wife (Ephesians 5:31). It is obvious from this passage that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman.

The book of Leviticus gives detailed applications of God's law to Israel. It states that for a man to lie with another man as with a woman is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22). The penalty for homosexual activity was death for both participants, because both committed an abomination (Leviticus 20:13).

Sometimes people say that Leviticus does not apply to modern people. It is true that some of the commands in Leviticus had ceremonial significance. However, the commands in Leviticus 18-20 forbid other sexual perversions such as sex with close relatives, sex with animals, and prostitution of a daughter. Other commands in these chapters forbid child sacrifice, stealing, idol worship, mistreating deaf or blind people, oppressing the poor, mistreating foreigners, and having false scales. It is obvious that these commands are applications of God's standards of morality and justice that apply to all people in all places for all time.

» A student should read Romans 1:18-32 for the group.

This passage begins with the statement that God's judgment is coming upon all people who knowingly rebel against God. The passage says that after people rejected knowledge of the one true God, the Creator, they became idolatrous, worshipping created things. Their rejection of truth led to sexual sin, even going to the extent of homosexual activity. The passage states that sex between people of the same gender is against what is natural. Some people have said that this passage is referring to homosexual rape, but the passage says that people *together* did what is wrong and received judgment for it, so it refers to voluntary activity together. The passage goes on to list many kinds of sin and describes an attitude of rebellion against God.

The Apostle Paul listed homosexual activity with other sins that God condemns (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10).

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHURCH

Some churches have struggled to find a way to show love to people who are in sexual sin. Some churches have excused various forms of sexual sin as normal and natural and unavoidable.

- » What are some responsibilities of the church regarding issues of sexual morality?

### Teaching and Loving Righteousness

Sometimes the church seems unconcerned about forms of sexual immorality that they think are less harmful and less perverted. For example, they may assume that many young, unmarried people will have sexual activity instead of teaching them to have victory over temptation. Believers should uphold God's standard of holy living and reserve sexual activity for marriage.

The message of the church should be as clear as the Bible's statements. God will judge those who have sexual activity outside of marriage (Hebrews 13:4). Believers should not admire a person for immoral sexual activity. Followers of Christ should not make jokes about sexual immorality. The world teaches that sexual sin should be managed carefully to avoid pregnancy and disease, but the message of the church is more important. The church should teach that sexual sin leads to sorrow, damaged families, increased temptation and discontentment, and guilt.

### Sharing the Gospel

The church should love all sinners and offer Christ's grace and forgiveness.

It is not sinful to experience temptation; even Christ was tempted, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). The church should not make a person feel condemned and hopeless because of temptations, even temptations to perverted sexual actions. Wrong desires are not the same for everyone, but everyone is born with a sinful nature and spiritual defects that cause wrong desires.

A pastor may feel that he has not been specially trained to help a person with wrong desires, but he can counsel and help a person with this problem the same as a person with any other sin. (The two next sections of this lesson offer further, specific counsel for helping believers to be victorious over temptation to sexual immorality.)

- » How should the church respond when a church member has committed sexual immorality?

## Restoring the Sinner

Galatians 6:1 says that the church must try to restore a member who has sinned. That does not mean that a person should keep a ministry position or be quickly put back into a ministry position after he has sinned. Restoration means to be accepted back into the fellowship and care of the church. If the member truly repents, he is forgiven by God and the church. The church should provide spiritual accountability to help him maintain victory and become spiritually strong. As a restored believer lives in accountability, he can gradually rebuild the trust of his family of faith.

If an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, the church should not exclude her from the fellowship and care of the church without attempting spiritual restoration. If she repents and submits to spiritual accountability, she is forgiven. Her sin is not worse than the sin of the man who was involved. Sometimes the girl is treated severely simply because the results of her sin are so visible.

In some places, the church treats a child differently because he was born outside of marriage, but that is wrong because it is not the child's fault. For the church to love and accept the child does not mean that they excuse sin.

## Protecting the Vulnerable

In some societies, parents who feel shame because of their unwed daughter's pregnancy are tempted to kill the unborn child to save the reputation of their family. But there is never a good reason for murder (Exodus 20:13). Every unborn child is made in God's image (Genesis 9:6, Psalm 139:13-14). The girl's baby must be protected, loved, and nurtured.

## Providing Alternatives to Poverty

The church is a family of faith. It is not enough for the church to condemn sins. The church must take care of its members. For example, a person being supported financially by sinful activity may need help to develop alternative financial support.

For example, several girls were attending a large church and singing in the choir. Their families were poor. The girls were in immoral relationships with men in order to earn money to help their families. What should the church do in that situation?

- » What should your church do to help people leave sinful lifestyles?



## HELP FOR THOSE ENDURING TEMPTATION

We discussed many difficult topics in this lesson. It is likely that many of those reading the lesson have struggled with some of these issues. Some readers are church leaders who need to know how to counsel other believers who are facing temptations.

No matter the kind of temptation, there are certain behaviors and thought patterns that can help a believer to be victorious.

A follower of Christ will be helped by:

1. **Being absolutely committed to your relationship with Christ (Matthew 16:24-27).** Temptation to sexual immorality, like all temptation, is Satan's attack on your soul (1 Peter 2:11). He only wants to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). You must flee for your life (2 Timothy 2:22).
2. **Being confident that Jesus cares (Psalm 139:1-3, 1 Peter 5:6-10).** He cares about your faith, your physical needs, and your purity. In his humanity, he victoriously endured the physical and mental temptations we face, and he has the grace we need to be victorious (Hebrews 4:14-16).
3. **Not believing the devil's lies (John 8:44).** The devil may tell you "Jesus doesn't care, or he would take away the sex drive that is so frustrating to you." 1 Peter 5:7-8 tells us that Jesus does care, and the devil is the one who wants to destroy us. The devil may falsely accuse you of being sinful because of having sexual desires (Revelation 12:10).
4. **Focusing on Jesus Himself and praising him for who he is (Psalm 105:3-4).** The devil would love to destroy your faith and your relationship with God through this test (John 10:10). But Jesus' purpose for this test is that your faith will be strengthened, and that you will better be able to glorify him (1 Peter 1:5-9). When you focus on worshipping Jesus, he will be present to help you (Psalm 46:1).
5. **Meditating on God's Word (Psalm 119:9).** Reading, listening to, and meditating on God's Word will help you to stand victorious in time of temptation. When Jesus was tempted, he used scripture to overcome (Matthew 4). We must do the same.
6. **Thanking Jesus for your sexual desires, even while praying for strength to overcome temptation (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).** You can be thankful for your natural desires, because they are part of God's design of your humanity and they force you to depend on Jesus and seek his strength. Your weakness gives an opportunity to mature in your walk with him.
7. **Staying accountable to at least one mature and godly person (Galatians 6:2).** Being open and honest with someone (your same gender) who is farther along the

journey of faith will be very helpful. They will be able to pray for you and advise you. Talking with them about your struggles will help you to maintain purity and keep encouraged in your faith.

8. **Serving others and focusing on their needs (Philippians 2:3-5).** Fight against excessive concern about your own needs and desires by serving other people.
9. **Getting married to the right person in God's time (Proverbs 5:15, 18-19).** (Upcoming lessons discuss how to make a wise choice for marriage.)
  - » Which of these ideas are new to you? Which have you found helpful in your own life?
  - » What other behaviors or thought patterns have been helpful to you?

## MORAL PURITY BEFORE MARRIAGE

Young people face strong temptations before they are married. It is important for them to remember that they need a life partner who can be faithful.<sup>21</sup> They should not consider a relationship with a person who wants to have short-term pleasure without marriage. They should not consider having a relationship with a person who is not a committed believer (1 Corinthians 7:39). They should consider only someone who will be a faithful marriage partner and a good parent.

A young person who wants to have a good marriage should be a faithful, committed follower of Christ so that the right kind of person will be attracted (Proverbs 3:4-8). A person demonstrates good character with appropriate behavior and modest dress (1 Timothy 2:9-10). People who behave carelessly with people of the opposite gender imply that they are willing to have a relationship based on the wrong desires (1 Thessalonians 4:1-7). A person who dresses in a way that causes wrong desires attracts a person who wants to have pleasure without commitment (Proverbs 7).

God has given parents, pastors, and other Christian leaders to provide guidance in behavior, dress, and relationship choices. As young people submit to these leaders in obedience to God, they will have God's greatest blessings and will be protected from much harm and temptation.

- » Students should read 1 Peter 5:5 and Hebrews 13:17 for the group.

It is the responsibility of children and young people to submit to the wisdom and leadership of their parents and spiritual authorities. It is the responsibility of these leaders to help young people live victorious over temptation.

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21 See Proverbs 31:11-12, 1 Timothy 3:11-12, Malachi 2:14-16, and Proverbs 2:16-17.

- » Students should read Romans 13:14 and 1 Corinthians 10:13 for the group.

God does not allow believers to be in situations of temptation beyond what they are able to resist and escape **if** they are willing to. Young people are responsible to flee temptation (2 Timothy 2:22). However, parents should prevent their youth from experiencing unnecessary temptation as much as possible. There are at least three ways parents do this:

1. **By giving specific instructions** about what the children should and should not do, who they should be with, and where they should go (Ephesians 6:1-4). Parents should not allow their children to be in situations where their maturity will not be sufficient to protect them from temptation. For example, if a young man and young woman are alone in a private place, they will likely be tempted to wrong behavior.
2. **By keeping their young people accountable in areas of temptation.** A parent should pray with the young people and ask questions about their life. The effectiveness of accountability will depend on the strength of the relationship between the parent and child. If the child does not trust the parent to be loving, accepting, and supportive, the child will not want to admit any failure.
3. **By giving young people biblical advice.** Parents should help their young people learn to consider situations with biblical principles in mind (Proverbs 4:1-9, Proverbs 7:1, 4-5). They should talk with their youth about the dangers that they see. They should help their youth consider the various choices that they will need to make. They can help their youth think ahead of time about how to avoid temptation and what to do when they do have temptations.

The church must be distinct from its culture when it defends biblical morality. Many cultures do not consider sexual sin to be serious. They expect young unmarried people to have sexual relationships before marriage. The church must not compromise with sin. The church should not assume that sexual sin among young people is normal. God says those who are immoral have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ (Ephesians 5:5).

- » How could the church help young people who are struggling with the temptations of the world?
- » Students should read Ephesians 5:3-7 and Hebrews 13:4 for the group.

The period of time when a relationship exists before marriage is not a time for a sexual relationship to begin. Instead it is a period of time when the man and woman make sure that they share the same spiritual and biblical priorities. It is a time when they develop an understanding of each other that enables them to trust each other enough to make a permanent commitment to one another. If they are not able to come to this trust of each other's character, they should end the relationship and not marry.

People in some societies delay marriage because their culture expects marriage to be an elaborate, expensive ceremony. Many times, couples live together for years and have children while delaying marriage. For some couples, the expense of their wedding hurts them financially for long afterward because they spend everything they have for the wedding event and may even borrow money. The church should be a community of faith that provides a different model of marriage. Christian marriage is for a man and woman who are committed to each other and to God and should not require great expense that delays the wedding or hurts the couple's future.

- » What are some ways that Christian marriage should be different from the marriage customs of society?

## TEACHING CHILDREN GOD'S PURPOSE AND RULES FOR SEX

Children see and hear references to sex. They hear opinions from people about what is right and wrong. Children will eventually have sexual feelings, desires, and temptations, so it is very important for Christian parents to explain what God says about sex. Children should not know details about sexual activity, because they are not old enough to be married, and that knowledge would give them unnecessary temptations.

Children need to know God's plan and their responsibility to obey him. They need to know that they will face temptation. They need to be prepared to obey God and to control their own sexual desires until they are married.

The following material is useful for teaching children a Christian view of sexuality without talking about details of sexual activity. It is written in a simple way, the way you would talk to children.

### Talking with a Child

- » Read Genesis 2:7, 18-24 with the child.

This passage tells us how God created the first man and first woman and put them into a special relationship.

God designed marriage as a special relationship between a man and a woman. A married couple have a special love for each other. Part of their relationship is a special pleasure that they have when they put their bodies together privately in an action called sex. God designed sex to give a husband and wife pleasure and to sometimes cause a wife to have a baby.

Because sex gives such a special pleasure, a man and a woman have a natural desire to see and touch each other's body and enjoy each other's attention.

In the Bible, God tells us that sex is good and right for a husband and wife. But God also tells us that sex is very wrong for people who are not married to each other. God has given us rules about sexual activity for at least four reasons:

**1. Sexual pleasure is designed for marriage.**

God has designed sex to be a special part of the marriage relationship. Though it is possible for any man and any woman to have pleasure together this way, the pleasure is most special in a marriage, because each person is given completely to the other person alone. For people who are not married, sex does not have that meaning, and they cannot have the full relationship God intended. Therefore, a person who is too young to be married should not have sex. People should not have sex until they have made the marriage commitment and had a public marriage ceremony. A person should have sex only with their own spouse.

**2. Sexual desires are very strong.**

It is not wrong to have sexual desires, because God created them. But it is wrong to purposely increase a desire to do something God does not want. Because of this:

- Except in marriage, a person should not do things that cause sexual desires to be stronger, such as purposely looking at or thinking about someone else's body.
- Except in marriage, a person should not touch another person in a way that will increase either person's desire for sex.
- A person should not choose to imagine doing wrong things.
- A person should not look at pictures or videos to enjoy seeing people doing wrong things.
- A person should not dress in a way that could cause others to want to do wrong things or imagine doing wrong things.
- A person should not behave or talk in a way that seems like he wants to do wrong things.

**3. Our desires cannot guide us.**

Animals are controlled by their feelings and desires. We are not animals; we are people made in God's image. Because of this, we must think about what we *should* do, and then make right choices. We should not be controlled by our feelings and desires. Sometimes it is right to do what we want; sometimes it is not. Our desires cannot tell us when sex is right. Instead of obeying our feelings, we must follow God's directions from the Bible with the help of God's Spirit.

#### 4. Sex sometimes creates babies.

God has designed that babies come from the relationship of love. He has designed that children need many years to grow up in a family that loves them and cares for them. A baby whose mother and father are not married to each other usually does not have both a mother and a father to care for it until it is an adult.

Realizing the four facts listed above, people who want to please God and have the best life will follow God's directions. They will establish careful habits to help them resist temptation to disobey God.

### A Child's Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for making me a (boy or girl). Thank you for your special, good plan for marriage. Please help me to love and obey you all my life. You see everything I do, and you know everything I think. Please help me to always obey your directions for life. I want my thoughts and actions to please you. Help me to help my friends obey you by being a good example to them. At the right time, when I am grown up, help me to be the (husband or wife) you want me to be. I love you, God!

Amen

### PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for making us in your image, giving our lives purpose and meaning. Thank you for creating gender to help us reflect your image.

Thank you for your good design and purposes for human sexuality in marriage.

We repent of the ways that we have disobeyed your Word. Please wash, forgive, and sanctify us in the name of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:11). Set us free from enslavement to sin (Romans 6:6-7). We now present our bodies to you, committing to do what is right in your sight (Romans 6:13-14).

Enable us to learn habits of righteous thinking and behavior (1 Timothy 4:7, Psalm 23:3). May our thoughts and actions always be pleasing in your sight (Psalm 19:14). Thank you for promising to provide us with victory in every time of temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read Galatians 5:16-6:9 while considering the topics discussed in this lesson. Answer the following questions in writing:
  - What is the difference between the desires of the flesh (5:16) and the actions of the flesh (5:19)?
  - What two things are promised to those who commit the actions of the flesh (5:19-21, 6:7-8)?
  - How can a believer have the strength to not obey the desires of the flesh (5:16, 22-23, 25)?
  - What are some truths believers should remember during times of temptation that will help them to overcome? (Name at least four from this passage.)
  - What things are believers instructed to do in this passage? (Name at least four from this passage.)
  - What are the responsibilities of believers to one another (Galatians 6:1-2, 6)?
2. Read Romans 6:1-23. Answer the following questions:
  - What things does this passage say are true about every believer? (List 6-8 things.)
  - What choices must believers make because of what is true about them? (List 6-8 things.)
  - Why can a believer expect to be victorious in time of temptation to sin? (Write a paragraph.)
3. Read Romans 8:1-14. Write a prayer based on the truths in this passage.
4. Memorize Romans 6:11-14 and Colossians 3:5-7. At the beginning of the next class, write or recite the passages from memory.

# LESSON 5

## SINGLENES

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand singleness from a biblical perspective.
2. Identify biblical priorities for choices regarding marriage and singleness.
3. Commit to moral purity, godly character, and fruitful service in this period of life.
4. Surrender to Jesus as Lord and become complete in him.

### WORSHIPPING JESUS, SINGLE OR MARRIED

Stephen and Sarah were trying to discern if marriage was God's will for them. Sarah knew that if she married Stephen—who was a missionary—her life would change in many ways. She would move to a new country, learn a new language, and adjust to a new culture. She knew that she would be leaving what was familiar and comfortable. There would be frustrations and sacrifices. Marriage would be not just a commitment of love to her husband but also an act of faith and of love for Jesus.

In time, Stephen and Sarah realized that they were not compatible, and that they should not marry. Sarah felt disappointed. She prayed about her disappointment. She prayed that God would help her to be fruitful for him during this period of her life. As she prayed, she realized that this surrender to the will of God was just as much an act of faith and of love for Jesus as marriage would have been.



## SINGLENES

In this course we explore God's design for marriage. From scripture we learn about God's purposes for marriage. We discuss God's instructions for marriage and practical ways to strengthen our marriages. We see the goodness of God's plan for marriage.

Marriage is God's will for most people. But many people live several years as single adults before marriage. Sometimes this time of singleness is lengthy. Some people experience another period of singleness after the death of their spouse or after a divorce. Some people never marry.

A person may be unmarried because of one or more of these reasons:

- They prefer the advantages of being single instead of married.
- They are worried about marriage because they have not seen good marriage relationships.
- They are currently focusing on goals such as education or career.
- They do not feel an emotional or physical need for marriage.
- They have not had an opportunity for a good marriage.

Because the choices of a single person greatly affect relationships with God and others, this lesson focuses on the life of an unmarried believer.

### What Jesus and Paul Said about Singleness

The Pharisees asked Jesus a question about divorce. After hearing Jesus' answer, his disciples concluded that it is better not to marry (Matthew 19:10). Jesus, who was unmarried and celibate throughout his life on earth, replied that most people need to marry and only a few are gifted with the ability to accept long-term singleness (Matthew 19:11-12).

The apostle Paul—who either had never married or was a widower—had similar advice for the unmarried believers in Corinth. Because of temptation to sexual immorality, most people should marry (1 Corinthians 7:2, 8-9). Paul knew that God created sexual intimacy in marriage as a good gift (1 Corinthians 7:7, 1 Timothy 4:1-5, Hebrews 13:4). He said that sexual activity should not occur outside of marriage (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

Paul described an advantage of the unmarried life. Unmarried believers can focus their time, energy, and effort on pleasing the Lord and serving in ministry (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

Paul remained unmarried (1 Corinthians 9:5). He chose to remain unmarried so that he could focus on the missionary work God had for him. He considered singleness a gift

(1 Corinthians 7:7-8). He endured much suffering in his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). This suffering was easier to face because he did not have responsibility for a wife or children (1 Timothy 5:8).

Though Paul found that singleness was an advantage for his ministry, there are also ways that marriage is an advantage for ministry.

- » How have you seen singleness as an advantage for ministry? How have you seen marriage as an advantage for ministry?

Paul said that people should take several things into consideration when deciding whether or not to marry:

- Their personal ability or inability to live in celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:9, 36-37)
- Current difficult circumstances, such as persecution (1 Corinthians 7:26)
- Responsibilities of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:27-28, 32-35)

## Right Priorities

Neither singleness nor marriage is better or more spiritual than the other. **There are unique temptations, difficulties, blessings, and opportunities with each.** Each is appropriate at different times and for different people.

Ultimately, personal fulfillment and wholeness must come from one's relationship with God, whether or not a person is married (Psalm 73:25, Psalm 107:8-9). Furthermore, all believers—married and unmarried—must keep their focus on eternity because life is short, and eternity is sure (1 Corinthians 7:31).

- » A student should read Matthew 6:26-33 for the group.

In this passage, Jesus explains that the world's values and priorities are very different from those of believers. The believer's highest goal is to participate in God's kingdom. The believer's first priority is to live a life of righteousness by God's grace. God promises to provide for the physical and material needs of his children when they are obeying Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33.

When should a Christian man marry? When marriage will help him better serve God's kingdom. When marriage will help him live a more fruitful, victorious life of righteousness.

When should an unmarried Christian man remain single? When the pursuit of marriage or marriage itself would distract him from his role in God's kingdom. When he can be more spiritually fruitful as a single man. When he can be spiritually victorious and maintain moral purity without having the sexual intimacy provided in marriage.

- » If you are single, pause for a moment of honest personal reflection.
  - Are you living in obedience to God's Word?
  - What has God given you to do in his kingdom right now?
  - What do you think God has called you to do with your life, long term?
  - Do you think marriage would make you do better or worse in your relationship with God and your work for God in the world?

Accepting God's priorities helps unmarried believers decide whether or not to pursue marriage. It also shapes our understanding of what we should look for in a potential spouse. Every believer who desires to marry should seek someone who is putting God first, living obedient to God's Word, and seeking to extend God's kingdom.

- » Students should read Ephesians 4:17-24 and 1 John 2:15-17 for the group.

People of the world live for self. They choose to do the things that their bodies and minds want (Ephesians 2:3), and they are willing to disobey God's Word. Sinful people often do what feels good, is most convenient, or makes other people pay attention to them. Their priority is pleasing themselves. They may build a romantic relationship with someone just because they are physically attracted to the person. They may be in a relationship with someone just because they have exciting feelings when they are with that person.

Selfish individuals may not want to commit to the self-giving relationship of marriage. They may be willing to have sexual relationships without marriage even though God says such relationships are wrong (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Selfish people who marry may give up on a spouse when marriage becomes difficult. They may divorce a spouse and move on to a new relationship with someone else. God has something much better for those who will obey the instructions of his Word (Psalm 19:8, 11, Deuteronomy 6:24).

Jesus calls us to please God in everything (Matthew 16:24, 2 Corinthians 5:9, Colossians 1:10). Since we are followers of Christ, the priority of our individual lives must be God's kingdom and righteousness. Furthermore, the priority in our pursuit of marriage must be God's kingdom and righteousness. We must honor God in our reasons for marriage and in the way we pursue marriage. We must listen to Jesus about his values and obey what he says is right and good. Then we must honor God by obeying his expectations of us as husbands and wives.

## For Everything There Is a Time

Early adulthood is the best time for most people to pursue marriage (Proverbs 5:18, Malachi 2:15, Titus 2:4). As a young adult, one should already be trained and ready for life. A man or woman should be mature, able to take responsibility and make wise decisions (1 Timothy

4:12). Ideally, young adults are ready for the responsibilities of marriage and child-raising. Their bodies are also ready for childbearing, and in most cases, they have strong sexual desires and the need for marital intimacy.

In many cultures today, it is becoming common for young adults to delay marriage until after they have completed higher education or become established in their careers. Other young adults are not interested in marriage because they want to live without responsibility.

Many young adults live sexually immoral lives before their marriage. They have strong sexual desires. Emotionally, they want intimate companionship. Yet, they do not want to commit to marriage and raising a family because of either their life goals or their unwillingness to take responsibility.

Christian young adults who are delaying marriage should carefully consider their priorities. They should make sure that they are living godly and pure lives and following God's will. Some need to consider the importance God places on marriage and raising up godly children.

### **Couples That Live Together Though Unmarried**

Sometimes, a man and woman live together in an intimate relationship, but delay marriage. They may be committed to each other, but they have not made a covenant of marriage. People have different reasons for this:

1. Sometimes cultural expectations of elaborate and expensive weddings prevent poor couples from having an acceptable wedding.
2. Sometimes a couple does not commit to marriage because of fear that their marriage will fail. They may think that separation would be less disastrous if they are not married. They may expect their relationship to become stronger while they live together.

God has reserved sexual intimacy for marriage (Hebrews 13:4). The couple who is living together but is not married is guilty of disobeying God's Word. Their intimacy can never be all that it ought to be, because of their lack of permanent exclusive commitment to one another and their lack of mutual trust.

Believers must not follow the example of unbelievers but must instead obey God's Word. The church must uphold God's expectations for morality and offer practical support to help couples follow a scriptural plan for marriage. For example, when a couple is not able to have an expensive wedding, the church family should support them in having a simple wedding. This would help couples to obey God's standard for morality by being married. It would also help the couple not begin their marriage in financial debt. Christians must remember that marriage is much more important than the wedding ceremony itself, yet a definite marriage commitment must be made.

- » Students should read Romans 12:2 and Philippians 2:15-16 for the group. Discuss how believers' commitment to morality can change the culture around them.

## HEALTHY SINGLENESS

### A Matter of Surrender

Every child of God must surrender his or her desires to Jesus. Jesus is Lord. Throughout life, every believer will be tested in their devotion to Jesus as their Lord. Something difficult will happen... or something good we desire will *not* happen... and Jesus will ask us, his followers, "Am I your Lord? Will you trust my goodness? Will you believe that I have the perfect plan? Will you obey me? Will you surrender to me? Will you submit to what I am doing? Will you glorify me in this?"

Some singles are happy to remain single. But those who desire to be married and have not had a good opportunity to marry must humbly accept God's choice in withholding marriage.

Christian men and women... realize that if God desires for them to be married, he will make it clear in his own perfect time and way. But he must always come first, and he must always be [trusted completely].<sup>22</sup>

God is trustworthy and good. There is work he wants to do in the unmarried believer's heart and life. God will always allow what is ultimately best for his children, and more importantly, what will bring Jesus the most glory. In all things, God is working to make us like Jesus in our character (Romans 8:28-29), and to enable us to worship Jesus as we should throughout eternity (1 Peter 1:6-7).

God is perfectly able to provide a godly spouse for one of his children. He can help a Christian man to find a godly wife, as the man looks for a virtuous woman who is honoring God with her life (Proverbs 18:22, Proverbs 19:14, Proverbs 31:10).

The unmarried woman who is living for Christ can trust God to take care of her needs in exactly the best way, whether or not God leads a man to marry her. She can live a full and spiritually fruitful life because of God's provision and faithfulness.

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**"Contentment is the satisfaction that comes from knowing that God is sovereign over my circumstances and is giving me what is best for me."**

**Phil Brown**

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22 Adapted from Leslie Ludy, *Sacred Singleness* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 24.

If singleness is God's choice for her, she will find God to be a perfect lover, provider, protector, and leader. Jesus can be the husband of her heart (Isaiah 54:5), and she can love, honor, submit to, and obey him, instead of an earthly husband.

If marriage becomes God's choice for her, her time of singleness will have taught her to trust God (who is the *only* perfect lover, provider, protector, and leader), even as she learns to love, honor, and submit to an imperfect, human husband.

## Completeness in Christ

All believers must find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ, not a human companion. Even if someone would prefer to be married, prolonged singleness gives the opportunity to make sure he is indeed fulfilled in Jesus. Singleness gives the opportunity to prove that Jesus is enough (Philippians 4:11-13).

The fact that God created marriage, and that we are to esteem it as a holy institution, is evident throughout scripture.... It was not good for Adam to be alone, but was that because God himself was not enough to fulfill Adam's needs? Certainly not! As the Bible explains, God created Eve because Adam needed a *helper*, a companion to do the work on earth God had called him to do. Yes, there were many blessings and benefits that came to both Adam and Eve through their companionship with each other, but their marriage was never to take the place of God. He was still God, and he was still meant to be their first and primary object of love and worship.<sup>23</sup>

A person may learn to experience more of God's love when he does not have a spouse or family to provide physical and emotional affection. Scriptures like Psalm 73:25-26 are encouragements in times of emotional trial and physical temptation:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

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### A Prayer

**"I am yours, Lord.  
That is my identity,  
my calling,  
my security,  
my comfort,  
my purpose,  
my joy, and  
my reward.  
I need You.  
You are enough.  
You fill me.  
You are my source.  
You complete me."**

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As Leslie Ludy writes,

David the psalmist had plenty of female companionship in his life. But it is David's intimate relationship with *God* that brings him the perfect satisfaction these verses portray.<sup>24</sup>

The single believer will find that Jesus is enough; a relationship with God satisfies.

## Opportunities for Service

When unmarried believers find their satisfaction in Christ, he makes their singleness an opportunity to serve others. Instead of focusing on their own needs and feeling discontented, they can learn to notice and meet others' needs. Helping others is one of the best ways to lead a fruitful and fulfilled life. The character developed through this time in life will help them to continue to bear good fruit throughout their lives.

- » Students should read Philippians 2:3-4 and Titus 3:8, 14 for the group.

As stated earlier, different life situations provide unique opportunities. In every stage of life, there are things that a person can do, and other things they cannot do. One single young lady made this list of things that she is able to do especially *because* she is single. Other single men and women will have different things to put on their lists.

Because I am a single young lady, it is much easier for me to:

- Visit the elderly and spend time with them.
- Make and serve food for the homeless.
- Do thorough Bible study and prepare Bible lessons for children.
- Minister to women and girls in my home.
- Spend uninterrupted time in intercessory prayer.
- Learn a new skill.
- Write letters and cards of encouragement.
- Volunteer to help other people with projects.
- Quickly adjust my schedule when a special need or event suddenly comes up.

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**“If you’re single,  
remember that you are  
not called to waste  
your time and freedom  
on self-centered  
pursuits, but to serve the  
church and the world.”**

**Adapted from  
Paul Lamicela**

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24 Leslie Ludy, *Sacred Singleness*, 67. Leslie Ludy was referring to Psalm 16:11, Psalm 73:25, and Psalm 107:9.



Each person has specific opportunities or responsibilities because of their life situation. The list a mother of young children would write could include examples of the things that she is teaching her children or ways she is training them. Because she is their mother, God has given her the opportunity and responsibility to serve in these ways. (At the end of this lesson you will make your own personal list.)

## Companionship

It is very important for those who are not married to build healthy relationships with others. As discussed in earlier lessons, God made people for relationships with him and with other people.

- Single people need relationships with people they can serve—maybe children or young people or elderly people.
- Single people need older, mature mentors for counsel and accountability.
- Single people need friends who are in a similar place in life, so that they can encourage each other in the Lord and fellowship together.
- Single people need to be friends with married couples and with families. There are many mutual blessings in such friendships.

Having a wide variety of relationships with others gives a single person many opportunities to serve. Friendships provide some of the emotional and spiritual support that the single person needs. Friendships help fill their need for family, especially if they do not live near their own family.

Two cautions must be added:

1. A person who is not married must be careful to avoid forming unwise or immoral relationships because of emotional and physical needs.
2. A single person must prioritize relationship with God over any human relationship.

## Thought Life

All believers must work to keep their thought lives pure by God's enabling grace (Proverbs 4:23). Psalm 19:14 is a prayer, asking God to help us carefully live for him in our words and our thoughts. This prayer reminds us that we are accountable to God for our purposeful thoughts and speech.

We have choices about what we put into our minds (Philippians 4:8): what we watch, listen to, or read. If we want to honor God, we must choose mental food that is pure and that will draw us closer to him and help us to obey him (Romans 12:2, Romans 13:14).



Followers of Christ must not entertain themselves with the sins of others (Psalm 101:3, 1 Corinthians 15:33). To enjoy watching immoral behavior is to participate in someone's sin (Romans 1:32). Watching and listening will desensitize the believer to sin and cause him to lose his focus on pleasing the Lord (Proverbs 13:20). God's Word emphasizes our need to reverence the Lord at all times (Proverbs 23:17) and to hate evil as he does (Proverbs 8:13). When we fear the Lord and turn away from evil, we are blessed (Psalm 111:10).

When we have disobeyed God's instructions for what to put into our minds and what to meditate on, we must confess our sin and stop doing those things. Even in those cases when we may have accidentally heard or seen something bad, we must intentionally replace thoughts about those things with good and godly thoughts.

- » Students should read Psalm 19:14, Psalm 1:1-2, Philippians 4:6-8, and Ephesians 5:25-27 for the group.

The verses from Philippians tell us that God wants to protect our hearts and minds, but we must cooperate with him by purposefully meditating on right things. Meditation on scripture is so important to a healthy and pure thought life. Ephesians tells us that the Word of God washes us clean. This certainly includes our minds and thoughts.

- » What activities help you to have a God-honoring thought life? What other verses have helped you in your thought life?

## Singleness and Sexuality

*If you are studying this lesson independently of the entire course, please also study Lesson 4 where sexual purity and moral issues are discussed.*

## CONCLUSION

Singleness provides believers with unique opportunities to grow in their relationship with Christ and to learn to serve others. Unmarried people should find their fulfillment in Christ while building healthy relationships with other people. They should use the opportunities of their singleness for the glory of God and the good of his kingdom. God's priorities help believers make good decisions regarding the possibility of marriage.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » Name and discuss several priorities that should guide decisions regarding the single years of life, a choice to marry, and the pursuit of marriage.
- » How can your church minister more effectively to single members?
- » How can your family befriend someone who is single?
- » If you are single, how can you contribute to your church family? How can you be a blessing to others of various ages and periods of life?
- » What ideas in this lesson were new to you?
- » What else do you wish could have been discussed in this lesson?
- » Discuss how concepts in this lesson apply to other periods of life.

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for being faithful to us in every period of life. Thank you for the examples of those who live in your presence and for your glory in their single years.

Help us to be completely surrendered to you through all of life. Help us to seek and find fulfillment in our relationship with you. Help us to use the opportunities you've given us in our present time of life.

Enable us to always honor you in our choices, our thoughts, our relationships with others, and our service. Make us fruitful for your glory.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Think of a situation in which Jesus asked you to surrender to his plan. In at least two paragraphs, describe the circumstance and your response to it. (This could be a current situation or something from your past.) How was your faith being tested? How did the Lord lead you? Did you surrender to his plan? What did you say to him? What did obedience look like for you in this situation?
2. What opportunities do you have **because of** your marital status, gender, or life situation? For the moment, do not think about what you **cannot** do. Instead, take a few minutes to list the things that you are able to do because of where God has you right now. Write, "Because I am \_\_\_\_\_ I have the opportunity to..."
3. Read and meditate on each of the scriptures below, all of which were referenced in the last section of the lesson. Ask God to show you anything you need to change, so that your thought life is pure and pleasing to him. Write a prayer of confession and commitment to obedience.
  - Psalm 1:1-2
  - Psalm 19:14
  - Psalm 101:3
  - Psalm 111:10
  - Proverbs 4:23
  - Proverbs 8:13
  - Proverbs 13:20
  - Proverbs 23:17
  - Romans 1:32
  - Romans 12:2
  - Romans 13:14
  - 1 Corinthians 15:33
  - Philippians 4:6-8
4. Choose three of the verses from Assignment 3 to memorize. At the beginning of the next class, write or recite the verses from memory.

## LESSON 6

# PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Realize the importance of choosing a spouse wisely.
2. Describe the type of person who is qualified to become the spouse of a believer, based on biblical priorities and principles.
3. Apply biblical principles to parental involvement in relationships before marriage.
4. Make wise decisions in friendships before marriage.

### RUTH AND SAMUEL

Ruth was raised in a Christian family in India. One day her family told her about a young preacher named Samuel who needed a wife. They also talked to Samuel about her. Ruth said she was not interested in meeting him. One day she came home in the evening and found that Samuel had been waiting there for several hours to meet her. She was not happy to see him, but she sat down to let him talk to her. He said, "I'm a Bible institute teacher. I don't get paid much. I also travel to preach the gospel in difficult places, and sometimes I sleep outside on the ground. Are you willing to suffer with me?" Ruth began to weep as he spoke because she felt that God was telling her that this was the man she should marry. After that conversation, they saw each other rarely, and never alone, until the wedding. They have now served together in ministry many years.

## THE CHOICE OF A SPOUSE

### Choose Carefully!

Jesus said that marriage is a lifelong commitment, by God's design (Matthew 19:6-8). You are not just marrying someone for right now. You are marrying someone to have as your life partner until one of you dies (Romans 7:2). Make a wise choice!

You will not share only the good times and joys of life. You will share the difficulties, heartaches, crises, and tragedies of life. You do not know what kind of sorrows you will face. There are many blessings from being married to a good and godly mate in the hard times. But the hard times are worse when you have a spouse who is not strong in the Lord. You are marrying someone for the rest of your lives—for all conditions. Choose a spouse carefully!

You are marrying someone with whom to raise a family. You are choosing your children's parent and the grandparent of your descendants. You are choosing someone whose spiritual life will greatly influence your children's spiritual lives. You are choosing someone whose character, habits, and behaviors your children will imitate (Ephesians 5:1). You are choosing the one who will shape and train your children through example and speech (Proverbs 23:26). Choose someone who will nurture and cherish your children, someone who will lead and discipline them with carefulness, diligence, and love. You are choosing someone who will impact generations—for good or for harm. Choose wisely!

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**“You didn’t choose to be born into your family; you *do* get to choose who you marry to create your next family.”**

**Gary Thomas**

*The Sacred Search*

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- » Students should read Proverbs 14:1, Proverbs 24:3-4, and Proverbs 31:10-12, 30 for the group.

Your choice of a marriage partner is the second most important decision you will ever make; the first is your choice to take Jesus as your own Lord and Savior. Your choice will change the course of your life, but it will affect many other people too. A wise choice will bless you and many other people. A foolish choice will harm you and many other people. Choose prayerfully!

There are no perfect people in the world. You have problems, weaknesses, and failures. Your spouse will also be imperfect and will remain imperfect throughout life. So don't look for a *perfect* spouse. Instead, look for a spouse who loves God without reserve. Look for someone who is humble enough to admit and correct mistakes and failures. A spouse like this will be a blessing to you, and you can support and help each other in areas of weakness.

- » Students should read Proverbs 11:14, Proverbs 12:15, Proverbs 13:18, and Proverbs 23:22 for the group.

Choose wisely. Choose for a lifetime. Get advice from godly people and your parents. Listen to their warnings. Do not just listen to your own emotions. The choice is too important for you to be careless.

## Do Not Marry an Unbeliever

One of the things that is very important to God is that his people marry only fellow believers. This is because one's relationship with God is the most important thing in all of life and eternity. Marriage—the closest of all human relationships—affects a person's relationship with God. It is more difficult for a believer to maintain a close and careful walk with God while having an unbelieving spouse.

Furthermore, a parent's unbelief greatly influences children against Christ. In families where one parent is an unbeliever, it is very rare for all of the children to serve the Lord. God wants us to serve him, and God tells us to raise our children to serve him (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 6:2, 7; Malachi 2:15).

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were not allowed to marry anyone outside the family of faith.<sup>25</sup> God knew that marriage to unbelievers would cause people to worship other gods, ruining their relationship with the one true God! The Old Testament shows us that is exactly what happened in Israel.<sup>26</sup>

Still today, believers must marry only believers. Do not compromise on this. Do not excuse a romantic relationship with an unbeliever.

- » Students should read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and 1 Corinthians 7:39 for the group.

## When Your Spouse Is Not a Believer

God does not want an unmarried believer to marry an unbeliever. That is certain. But when one spouse of an unbelieving family comes to Christ for salvation, he should remain married to his unsaved spouse, unless that spouse refuses to remain with him (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). In some cases, unbelieving spouses have been won to salvation because of the faith of their Christian husband or wife (1 Corinthians 7:14, 16; 1 Peter 3:1-2). But Christian singles should never even consider marriage to someone who is not a believer.

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25 Exodus 34:11-16, Deuteronomy 7:1-6, Joshua 23:11-13, Ezra 9-10

26 Judges 3:5-7, 1 Kings 11:1-6, Ezra 9:10-15

## Characteristics to Consider in a Potential Spouse

In preparation for marriage, individuals should develop character traits that will help them to be good spouses. As they seek someone to marry, they should look for someone who is also growing in these same characteristics.

1. **Marry someone whose relationship with Christ will encourage you in your own relationship with Christ and cause you to grow spiritually** (2 Peter 1:5-9, 2 Peter 3:18).

2. **Marry someone who has good character.**

Ephesians 5:33 commands wives to respect their husbands regardless of their character, but this is so much easier to do when they are married to men who are worthy of respect. Good character includes such behaviors as practicing forgiveness, having self-control, being humble, being diligent and responsible, and having a teachable spirit. The person you marry will not be perfect but should be growing in these behaviors.

God has high standards for church leaders and their wives (1 Timothy 3:2-4, 8-9, 11-12; Titus 1:6-8). If a church leader is married to a spouse with bad character, the ministry is greatly hindered.

3. **Marry someone who is building a reputation for purity and good behavior** (1 Timothy 2:9-10, 1 Timothy 3:7, 2 Timothy 2:19, Titus 1:15, Titus 2:4-5).
4. **Marry someone who is learning to think biblically** (Psalm 119:66). When faced with temptation, fear, a wrong attitude or wrong motivation, they are learning to remember, believe, and obey God's Word (Proverbs 4:4-6, Joshua 1:7-8). When facing need, danger, affliction, or trouble of any kind, they are learning to focus on God and find the help they need in his Word (Psalm 119:50, 92, 114).
5. **Marry someone who would make a good father or mother to your children:** someone who would teach them God's ways and live a consistent Christian life before them (Proverbs 6:20-23, Ephesians 6:4, 2 Timothy 1:5, 2 Timothy 3:14-15).
6. **Marry someone who has chosen to be influenced by godly friends and mentors** (Psalm 119:63, 2 Timothy 2:22).

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**A man and woman should not commit to marry each other until they can each sincerely say, "I will be better able to serve the Lord married to you, than I am single."**

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7. **Marry someone who is submissive to authority.** A man is wise to seek a submissive woman to be his wife (Ephesians 5:22). A woman should likewise marry someone who is submissive to God and to those God has put in authority over him in the church, in his job, in the government (Romans 13:1, Ephesians 6:5-8, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:5). As her husband submits to God, she will be protected and blessed.
- » Of the characteristics listed above, which seem the most important to you? What examples have you seen that show the significance of these characteristics?

## PARENT-ARRANGED MARRIAGES

In many cultures it is normal for parents to arrange the marriage of their children. For example, in one large country parents find a possible spouse for their child and talk with the other parents. Usually, they then arrange for the son and daughter to meet each other. The young people may meet each other once, or maybe twice or three times, before making the decision whether to marry. The children may be allowed to choose whether to accept the person chosen by the parents, but they do not get time to know each other well.

Christian parents in these cultures should follow biblical values as they seek prospective spouses for their children. They should seek godly, wise, and mature spouses for their children. They should look for individuals who are putting God first in their lives. These things should influence parents' selection more than someone's education, profession, social status, or financial level.

## INDEPENDENTLY-ARRANGED MARRIAGES

### Wisdom for the Parents of Grown Children Who Are Choosing Spouses

In some societies and cultures, including those of Europe and North America, it is typical for young adults to choose their own spouses without much direction from parents.

Christian parents in these cultures may feel that they cannot or should not try to influence their grown child who is seeking a spouse. The parents may feel that they shouldn't object even if they do not approve of the person their child is considering for marriage. They may fear that criticism will cause relationship problems with their child and child-in-law in the future.

Even when Christian parents do not arrange marriages for their children, they should influence their children's choice of a spouse. Parents should talk about these things with their children when they are still young. Parents ought to purposefully shape their children's thinking and values (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). How can you as a parent do this?



1. **Be a good example of a godly spouse and parent yourself.** Unless you are following God's principles in your own life, your verbal instruction to your children will mean nothing. If your example does not match what you say, your children will listen to your example instead of your words.
2. **Emphasize God's standards for the purpose of life, the purpose and meaning of marriage, and what to look for in a spouse (Psalm 34:11-12).** When we watch, listen to, read, or look at the world's norms, we teach our children that the world is our pattern, instead of God's Word being our pattern. Instead of doing this, we should cultivate godly desires in our children by drawing attention to people who follow God's good plans. We should point out the good consequences that these people enjoy because of their obedience to God.
3. **Teach your children that character matters more than anything else when choosing a spouse.** From the time they are young children, teach your children to watch for and value good character in others, more than attractive bodies or personalities. Teach them to notice whether their peers are responsible or lazy, obedient or rebellious, honest or deceitful. Teach them to care more about their own character than about their appearance.

If parents want their children to acknowledge them when choosing their life companions as young adults, they must teach their little children that listening to father and mother is smart! (Proverbs 1:8.) Adolescence or adulthood is too late to teach this; parents must teach this while their children are still young (Proverbs 4:3-9). Listening to godly parents is God's way for children to be protected and blessed.

As discussed in Lesson 4, parents are responsible to God to help their young people conduct relationships with moral purity. To do this, you must already have a good, open relationship with your child, in which they are willingly accountable to you and accept your advice. This kind of relationship is built in the early years of childhood as you diligently teach, train, lead, and discipline your little children every day.

## Wisdom for the Young Person Choosing a Spouse

God has wisdom for young believers who must make their own decision about marriage. Here is some wise advice for making good decisions:

### 1. **Reject unbiblical options.**

For example, we know that it is not God's will for believers to marry unbelievers, so we must not even consider having a romantic relationship with an unbeliever.

## **2. Pray for wisdom** (Proverbs 2; James 3:13, 17).

When we seek God's understanding with our whole heart, he is delighted to give us wisdom. Wisdom is found in careful study of and obedience to God's Word. God also gives us wisdom through the advice of godly people. Embracing God's wisdom protects us from sin and from harm. His wisdom provides us with blessing and gives us the opportunity to experience God's best plan for our lives. Most importantly, when we make wise decisions, we glorify our heavenly Father.

## **3. Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit** (Psalm 119:133, Proverbs 3:5-7, Jeremiah 10:23).

The Holy Spirit will never lead us to disobey God's Word. Instead, he faithfully reminds us of it (John 14:26, John 16:13-14). He guards God's obedient children from sin and rewards them with life and peace (Romans 8:5-6, 13-14; Galatians 5:16, 22-25). You may not always know the details of God's will in every situation, but you should follow what you do know for sure. You know that God wants you to be faithful spiritually and morally. You know that he wants you to avoid certain things and follow certain things. Do what you know is right while you pray for God's direction.

## **4. Pay careful attention to the advice of godly people.**

Young people who have godly parents should seek their wisdom. They should be open and honest with their parents about their marriage considerations. They should pay close attention to any concerns their parents have. God has given them their parents to help protect them from harm and provide them with good. Young people should not waste the opportunity to be blessed in these ways.

Many Christian young people do not have the input of a godly older family member. They should certainly get advice from people of godly character who have demonstrated the ability to make wise decisions with good results.

However, young people should not ignore input from their parents, even if their parents are not serving the Lord. There may be some instance in which a young person has to go against their unsaved parent's wishes in order to obey God, but this should never be done in rebellion (1 Samuel 15:23) or disrespect (Exodus 20:12). Regardless of parents' commitment to God, God is able to soften their hearts so that they give their blessing on the marriage of their son or daughter. Praying and waiting for God to change their parents' hearts will test and strengthen this son or daughter's faith.

- » Discuss principles or examples from scripture regarding parental involvement in the marriage decision. What should parents do to influence the spouse selection process? What should be the attitude of the Christian adult toward his parents in the marriage decision?

## THE FRIENDSHIP OF A COUPLE BEFORE MARRIAGE

If a courtship period is possible, it is best for a man and woman to spend time with each other in a variety of settings. This enables them to learn how the other person behaves, interacts with others, responds to unexpected circumstances, and handles different situations. This time together can help them understand whether they would be compatible marriage partners.

### Commitment to Purity

» Students should read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 and 2 Timothy 2:19-22 for the group.

God lovingly created men and women with desires and capacities for physical and emotional intimacy. Because of these desires, friends who are pursuing a possible future marriage must purpose to be careful in their relationship with each other. God intends for these desires to be fulfilled within an exclusive, lifelong covenant of marriage.

If a man and woman do not intentionally commit themselves to carefulness and purity, it is likely that they will disobey God by following their impulses in time of temptation. Disobedience to God's requirements for moral purity is hurtful in many ways and affects many people, not just a man and woman themselves. Disobedience results in regrets, bondage, guilt, shame, fear, distrust, and broken relationships.

There are many blessings for those who follow God's plan for purity. Those who honor God through obedience can experience every good that he has planned for them. Instead of the consequences of disobedience, they will have joy and peace. They will be able to trust each other. They will be able to have an enriching relationship with the Lord and with each other.

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**To obey God is to trust  
that he knows and wants  
what is best for you.  
(See Proverbs 3.)**

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These blessings are a strong motivation for following God's plan for purity. However, believers' greatest motivation for carefulness in this area should be their desire to bring honor to the Lord Jesus in every part of life. A dating couple should be asking, "How can we **best** honor God in our relationship? How can we bring Jesus the **most** glory?"

To avoid impure actions, a dating couple should be cautious about any increase of physical contact. They should avoid spending long periods of time alone in places where they feel that nobody else will know what they do. Couples struggle with temptation when physical contact becomes more important in their relationship than communication. They may become unable to deal with spiritual and relational issues well because their minds and hearts are dominated by physical desire. At the beginning of the relationship, decide together

what specific things you will do (and not do) in your relationship before marriage. Your plan should protect each of you from sin, help you to love your future spouses, and enable you to honor God. Commit yourselves to your plan. Be accountable to godly mentors and listen to their advice and cautions. Together spend time with godly friends and family members.

## Activities That Promote Growth

Courtship is a time of getting acquainted, but it should also be a time of growth. Here are some ideas of activities that a dating couple can do together:

- Do work projects.
- Learn a skill that is new for both of you.
- Read and discuss good books.
- Study or memorize the same scripture passages, then discuss them.
- Plan and conduct ministry activities together.
- Babysit children together.
- Spend time with each other's family.

These activities will:

- Help a man and woman get to know each other.
  - Help them know whether they are suitable companions for one another.
  - Increase their ability to communicate well with each other.
  - Help them to grow.
- » Which of these principles and ideas for courtship are new to you? How should believers in your context apply the biblical principles for purity and honoring God in relationships before marriage?

## Topics to Discuss before Marriage

In cultures where a couple gets to know one another as part of the decision-making process, there are important issues that should be discussed prior to the wedding.

In some cultures, where marriages are arranged by parents, a couple does not have the opportunity to get to know each other well. They do not have the chance to discuss every important issue prior to the wedding. In this situation, it is best if the parents of the man and woman share information with each other and make sure the young couple are a good match for each other.

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**Your self-control today  
is a gift to your future  
spouse. Your spouse  
will feel protected and  
honored because of your  
choice to obey God. Your  
spouse will feel so loved.**

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In cases where the ones marrying know little about each other, they work through these issues after they marry, but these issues cannot influence their choice, since they have already made a commitment to one another and the Lord.

The more similar a man and a woman's beliefs, background, culture, life goals, and values are, the more compatible they could be in marriage. If possible, a couple who is considering marriage should spend time discussing:

- Their life goals
- The values that are important to each of them
- Their own childhood and the way they were raised
- Their relationships with their parents and other relatives
- Their personal doctrinal beliefs and practices of faith, such as personal spiritual disciplines, church attendance, and acts of service and ministry
- Their understandings and beliefs about details of raising children, including teaching, training, disciplining children, and teaching them to know and obey Christ
- Their views of finances, including spending, saving, and living in difficult times
- Any physical or mental health problems or disabilities they have, and health problems that are common in their families

During this part of the relationship, you should talk about life's difficult and complicated topics. Once you have made your promises to God and each other, you are married for better or for worse. In marriage, a husband and wife share all that they are with each other, so honest communication leading up to marriage is very important. Discussions should be increasingly open and in-depth. If the person you intend to marry is unwilling to talk about these important matters, that is a serious danger sign.

Just before their wedding, a couple should discuss their beliefs, expectations, and desires about the sexual relationship within marriage. Discussing sex too early in the relationship can cause unnecessary temptation, but it is important to talk about prior to marriage.

It is helpful for a man and a woman who marry each other:

- To be similar intellectually.
- To have similar expectations for married life.
- To have similar doctrinal beliefs and spiritual practices.
- To have similar values and practices for use of both money and time.
- To have shared understanding of details of life and raising children.

## Danger Signs in Courtship

John Drescher lists eight problems that should cause a man or a woman to seriously consider ending a courtship relationship:<sup>27</sup>

1. **You and your friend have frequent arguments with each other.**
2. **You avoid discussing sensitive subjects** because you are afraid of hurting your friend emotionally. If you tell yourself, “I’d better not talk about this” – that is a danger sign. Marriage means you will need to discuss lots of things with confidence and love.
3. **Your relationship is getting increasingly physical.** The more physically involved you are as an unmarried couple, the less well you will learn to communicate with words, tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Touching more and talking less can be a real danger sign.
4. **You sense that you are staying in the relationship because of fear of some kind.** For example, “I’d like to stop the relationship, but I don’t want to disappoint anyone.”
5. **Your friend is not able to accept constructive criticism.** When your friend is wrong, do they refuse to apologize? That is destructive now, and would be even more destructive later, if you married each other.
6. **Parents or significant friends have objections to your relationship and your potential marriage.** This can definitely be a sign of danger and should make you consider ending the relationship. It is true that you do not just marry a person, but marry into a family that will have a lot of impact on the security and success of your marriage.
7. **Your friend is overly jealous or suspicious.** For example, if your friend questions your word, or in other ways does not trust you, this is a danger sign. Distrust will kill any marriage relationship. So, end the relationship while you can if your friend is overly jealous or untrusting.
8. **You have an uneasy feeling about the relationship;** particularly when you are alone with your friend. You have the thought or impression, “Something is wrong.” Pay attention to that lack of inner peace!

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27 Adapted from John Drescher, *For Better, For Worse: A Premarital Checklist*, (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 1999), 30-31.

## CONCLUSION

Proverbs 24:3-4, “By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.”

The choice of a spouse is one of the most important choices someone can make. God delights in helping his children to make wise choices as they consider and get acquainted with potential spouses.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What concept in this lesson was new to you? Why is it important? How will understanding it help you with your relationships? How will understanding it affect your ministry to others?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for leading us and providing for us. Thank you for the principles you have given us in your Word that help us to make wise choices about important decisions in life.

Please help us to have your priorities when choosing a spouse. Help us to be the men and women you want us to be. Help us to be humble and listen to the advice of godly people.

We want to live holy, fruitful lives that honor you.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Select part of this lesson to teach in your ministry context. You could teach an individual or a group of young people. Tell your class leader when you have done the out-of-class teaching.
2. In writing, describe characteristics of the relationship of a godly man and woman in your culture who are considering marriage or are planning to marry.
3. Whether or not you are married, review the list of characteristics to look for in a potential spouse. Read each scripture reference given. Ask God to show you how you need to grow.
4. If you are single and plan to be married in the future, create a list describing what you are looking for in a spouse. You do not need to share this with your class leader, but just let him know you completed the assignment.





## LESSON 7

# CULTIVATING A STRONG MARRIAGE

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the relationship between God's design of the needs of men and women and God's instructions for relationships in marriage.
2. Demonstrate ways that husbands and wives meet each other's needs by obeying Scriptural principles.

### ACCEPTING PERSONAL DIFFERENCES

It is no secret that men and women are different in many ways! Many men struggle to express their emotions, while many women consider expression of emotions to be part of real communication. Men tend to take more risks, while women are usually concerned about security. Men are naturally more attracted to physical beauty, while most women are naturally more attracted to emotional intimacy. Many more differences could be listed.

Besides the usual differences between the genders, a husband and wife have differences in personality. Maybe one enjoys being with people, but the other enjoys solitude. There are small preferences, such as how much light should be in the house or what temperature a room should have. Many marriages are troubled by disagreements about how money should be spent. These differences are not necessarily differences in character; they can simply be differences in personality and opinion.

Because marriage unites a man and woman, sometimes people think that the differences should end. A person may think that his spouse's differences are defects that should be corrected. Each spouse may persistently try to change the other spouse's opinions, habits, and preferences.

It is true that each person should develop and improve because of a relationship. However, sometimes our attempt to change a person is an attack of the person's individuality. In healthy marriages, each spouse cultivates the discipline of loving, respecting, appreciating, and serving the other.

- » What are other differences between men and women? What are other differences in personality that people should accept?

## CHOOSING TO SERVE

In his book, *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas says,

*A good marriage is not something you find, it's something you work for.* It takes struggle. You must crucify your selfishness. You must at times confront, and at other times confess. The practice of forgiveness is essential. This is undeniably hard work, but eventually it pays off. Eventually, it creates a relationship of beauty, trust, and mutual support.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas quotes Otto Piper:

If marriage... is a disillusioning experience for many people, the reason is to be found in the [apathy] of their faith. People dislike the fact that the blessings of God may only be found and enjoyed when they are persistently sought (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). Marriage is, therefore, both a gift and a task to be accomplished.<sup>29</sup>

Marriages often fail to flourish simply because husbands and wives are thinking of their own needs rather than trying to meet one another's needs.

We **cannot** meet each other's **deepest** needs. Our heavenly Father alone can fully satisfy our longings and desires, and that's why Jesus came. His purpose is to save us, fill us with His Spirit—the Holy Spirit—and to bring us into a deep and satisfying relationship with “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:14-15; Galatians 4:6).

However, one of God's purposes for marriage is that it be a training ground for servanthood; the same kind of servanthood we observe in Jesus (John 13:14). God wants to develop in each spouse the humble heart of a servant that is concerned for the other (Philippians 2:3-8).

Some of the most beautiful, happy marriages exist because one spouse chose to forget self and serve the other through an unusually difficult situation of sickness, failure, tragedy, or grief. Some husbands testify that their lives would have been hopelessly destroyed if their wives had not prayed for them, forgiven them, held them accountable, and unconditionally

28 Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 133.

29 Ibid.

loved them when they were most unlovable. Some wives testify that it was their husband's patience and understanding that enabled them to overcome the emotional damage caused by an abusive father or other trauma. Because we live in a fallen, sinful world, in which all creation groans (Romans 8:22), every married person carries wounds and scars. But God's grace can enable us to care for one another and to bandage one another's wounds!

Each of us was born selfish. We are naturally more concerned about our own needs than about the needs of others. God's saving and sanctifying grace can change us through the indwelling Holy Spirit until we become people who put the needs of others before our own. Marriages flourish when each spouse is attentive to the needs and desires of the other.

- » What does it mean to choose to serve?

## THE PRIMARY NEEDS OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES

God designed men and women to have different needs and desires. That means that a man should not assume that his wife would be happy with the same things that make him happy. A wife should not assume that her husband wants to be treated the same way she wants to be treated. Obviously, some manners of kindness and courtesy should be the same for both, yet men and women each have some unique needs.

If we understand the special needs of men and women, we can understand how to meet the needs of a spouse. It is sad that many arguments and discussions between husbands and wives do not solve the problems because each person fails to understand the needs of the other. Each may be angry and resentful because the other does not understand.

All people need to be loved and respected, but there is a difference between men and women. The primary need of a woman is love, and the primary need of a man is respect.<sup>30</sup>

- » How have you observed this difference between the needs of men and women?

## HOW A HUSBAND SHOWS LOVE TO HIS WIFE

Ephesians 5:25, 28 says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies..."

A husband should frequently tell his wife that he loves her and should not assume that she knows. He must also show his love with more than words. He must show love in the ways that are significant to her. He should not think that she should feel loved because he shows love in the ways that are significant to him. Her needs are different from his.

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30 The book *Love and Respect* by Dr. Emerson Eggerich has been very helpful in this section.

### **1. A husband loves his wife by providing security.<sup>31</sup>**

A wife wants to know that the husband protects her physically and emotionally. The husband should deal with any conflicts with neighbors. The husband should make sure the home is a safe place. He should speak in her defense when she is criticized by others, even relatives. He should not strike his wife or hurt her physically in any way to make her obey him. He should do his best to provide the material needs of his family. If a husband is careless with money, his wife feels that he does not care about the needs of his family.

### **Financial Points for Husbands**

Money problems are one of the greatest causes of conflict in a marriage. Husbands,

- Refuse to do anything dishonest or immoral for profit; remember you are under God's authority.
- Give your tithe to the church because you are trusting God to provide for you.
- Look for the best option of employment but be willing to do unpleasant work for now.
- Whether employed or not, find work to do every day to help yourself and others.
- Don't spend tomorrow's money by borrowing money today.
- When you spend money for pleasure, include your wife and children.
- Save routinely for the routine expenses like the rent for your home.
- Invest money to improve your situation rather than spending money for comfort.

### **2. A husband loves his wife by reserving himself for her.**

A husband should keep himself morally pure and take delight in his wife, "a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love" (Proverbs 5:19). If a husband has inappropriate or immoral relationships with other women or uses impure entertainment, his wife feels unloved.

### **3. A husband loves his wife by trying to understand her.**

A husband will not always succeed in understanding his wife, but he should take the time to listen to and study her. Scripture tells husbands, "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way... since they are heirs with you of the grace of life..." (1 Peter 3:7).

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<sup>31</sup> There are many scriptures related to this truth including Ephesians 5:28-31, Colossians 3:19 (emotional protection), 1 Timothy 5:8 (physical provision), Nehemiah 4:13-14 (physical protection), and 1 Timothy 2:14 (spiritual protection).

If a husband ridicules his wife's feelings and opinions, she does not feel loved. She needs him to try to understand her concern even if her statements do not seem logical to him.

Because God made the husband the head of the home (Ephesians 5:23), the husband has the responsibility to lead the home (1 Timothy 3:4-5). However, the husband and wife should take time for discussion until they can agree on most decisions. The husband should not be quick to decide something without considering the feelings and opinions of his wife. If they cannot agree on an issue, the husband may need to make a decision, but he should feel sorrow that they failed to come to agreement. Usually the absence of unity is a warning to the husband. Women often have wisdom and discernment which men need to make good decisions.

- » A student should read Ephesians 4:2-3, 15-16 for the group. How do these verses apply to the relationship between a husband and wife?

#### **4. A husband loves his wife by appreciating her.<sup>32</sup>**

Many wives feel that their husbands do not appreciate the work they do. A husband should show gratitude to his wife. He should recognize the effort that she makes for their family. He should never criticize her in the presence of other people.<sup>33</sup> He should praise her character, attractiveness, and abilities. As much as he is able, he should provide for her to dress well. A wife does not feel loved when she feels that her husband does not care about her appearance.

When a husband criticizes his wife he may cause her to think that she is inadequate as a person and discourage her. Paul tells believers, "to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" (Titus 3:2). If criticism is necessary, a husband should be very careful to affirm that his appreciation of his wife is greater than his criticism. He should avoid pointing out the examples of women who are superior to his wife in various characteristics.

#### **5. A husband loves his wife by taking time for the relationship.**

To share life together requires time for conversation. Relationships are deepened through words (Proverbs 16:24, Proverbs 20:5). Spouses should talk about the things that fill their days. They should talk about their friendships, their feelings, their desires, and their concerns. A wife feels loved when her husband takes the time to talk and listen. When he comes home tired from work he may not feel like talking or hearing about problems at home, but he must not neglect this need. If a husband wants physical intimacy but is not available for emotional intimacy, the wife feels that she is used and not loved.

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32 Proverbs 31:28-31

33 In the context of marriage, this is an application of God's instruction to us in Ephesians 4:29-32, Ephesians 5:25-29 and Matthew 7:12.

## 6. A husband loves his wife by being patient with her weaknesses.

1 Peter 3:7 teaches, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel...” Most women are not as physically strong as most men. Also, most women are more vulnerable to emotional pain and distress than most men. A man should comfort and encourage his wife. He should learn how to relieve her stress. He should avoid making demands of her when she is tired, stressed, or worried.

## 7. A husband loves his wife by meeting her practical needs.

Just as a man wants to have the best tools for his work and a good place to do his work, he should provide a good environment for his wife. He should make sure the home is repaired and equipped with the things that she needs.

## Results When Husbands Love Their Wives

Most husbands find that when they show love to their wives, their wives respond with joy and cooperation. Women feel happiness when their husbands are devoted to them and show love to them in the ways listed. Men get the most from their marriage when they show love to their wives (Ephesians 5:28). However, men are not guaranteed results. There are exceptions. A man should not show love for the purpose of getting what he wants. He should show love in order to please God and to meet the needs of his wife rather than worrying about his own needs.

Some wives have been emotionally damaged by past experiences, and they may not respond to their husbands’ love quickly. These practices of showing love are not a technique to try for a few days as an experiment. A husband should continue to consistently show love in these ways because of the love he has in his heart for God and for his wife. Christ loves the Church with this faithfulness and self-sacrificing commitment.

## HOW A WIFE SHOWS RESPECT FOR HER HUSBAND

Ephesians 5:33 commands, “However, let each one of you **love** his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she **respects** her husband.”

A man needs respect. Most men would rather be respected by other people than be liked by them. God designed men to protect, support, and lead their families. The position of a father and husband deserves respect even before he does anything to earn respect. A wife should behave respectfully toward her husband even if his actions are wrong. She should treat him as a person, made in God’s image, who is important even when he does not use his authority perfectly (Ephesians 5:23). This does not mean that she cannot tell him she disagrees with his actions or decisions, but she should not treat him disrespectfully.

When a wife respects her husband by freely submitting to his authority, she displays her love for Jesus (Ephesians 5:22, 31-33).

Some wives think that they love their husbands even while they treat them disrespectfully—criticize them to their friends, behave secretively, and use hurtful words. They should understand that no amount of affection can compensate for disrespect.

Most women have a strong inclination to be motherly to a small child. They have a natural ability and a natural desire to care for the needs of a baby. Imagine how a woman would feel if someone said, “You are not capable of taking care of a baby.” Likewise, men have a strong inclination to protect, provide, and lead. When a man’s wife tells him he is unable to do those things, he feels that he is a failure as a man.

A wife should understand that there will be other men who have stronger personalities, earn more money, or hold higher positions than her husband. She should not make her husband feel like a failure by comparing him to others. As we learn from Ephesians 5:21-33, a wife is one with her husband. When a wife criticizes him or compares him to others, she damages *both* of them and their relationship.

- » A student should read Proverbs 31:11-12, 26 for the group. What do these verses teach us about how a godly wife treats her husband in her behavior and words?

### **1. A wife respects her husband with words of affirmation.**

A wife should affirm her husband’s potential. Respect will be evident in the affirming words a wife speaks to her husband. Words have a powerful effect on most men. They will either build up or tear down (Proverbs 14:1). They will either encourage or weaken. They will either strengthen his confidence or break his spirit (Proverbs 18:21). A man may not succeed at every enterprise or be able to hold some positions, but his wife should affirm his efforts to provide a home and security for his family. She should try not to discourage him from having ideas and attempting new challenges.

- » Students should read Proverbs 15:4 and Proverbs 16:24 for the group.

### **2. A wife respects her husband through submission (1 Peter 3:5).**

A wife’s submission does not mean that she is inferior to her husband. Instead it means that their roles are different. Even in the Trinity we see that the Son submits to the Father, though the Son is not inferior to the Father in nature or power or any attribute.

This principle is not easy for some wives, especially if their husband does not live by God’s Word, or if he is unkind to them. Some wives feel that they can make better decisions for themselves or for their family than their husband can. Sometimes the wife is right, and the husband is wrong. However, if a wife submits to her husband only when she agrees with



him, she is taking the authority and is not truly in submission. To submit means to allow another to make the decision.

Peter tells wives,

Be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives.... Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. (1 Peter 3:1, 3-4).

There are many difficult situations. Many wives ask questions. “If he tells me to \_\_\_\_\_ do I have to do it?” This lesson cannot speak to the great variety of situations that exist. However, the problem of submission often is not because a husband requires things that a wife should not do. A wife may not want to submit because she thinks that her husband would be unreasonable if she did. Maybe the husband is not loving and kind. A wife may not want to surrender her freedom to make her own decisions. The wife may have an attitude of defiance. The wife uses examples of her husband’s unkind actions or mistakes as an excuse for rejecting his authority in general. This is disobedience to the commands of God’s Word.

The Bible tells us that a godly, submissive wife may win her husband to the Lord. We are not guaranteed that a husband will become a believer because of a good wife, but he is much less likely to become a believer if his Christian wife is defiant. A wife may gain much favor from her husband by being respectful, but that is not the primary reason she should do it. She should respect her husband because she owes him respect and because she wants to please God.

Proverbs 12:4 says, “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.” If a wife treats her husband disrespectfully in the presence of his friends, it takes honor from him that she may never be able to restore. Men admire other men who have devoted wives. Men pity other men who have disrespectful wives.

### **3. The wife respects her husband by giving attention to his needs (Proverbs 31:15, 21, 25, 27).**

When a wife learns special details of preparing food and taking care of the house in ways that please her husband, he feels honored. If she refuses to change her habits for his sake, he feels that he is unimportant to her.

If a wife is busy with work or friends or church or entertainment and does not take time to listen to her husband talk or observe his needs, he feels that he is unimportant to her.

Genesis 2:18 teaches, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”

#### 4. A wife respects her husband by giving physical affection.

Sexual satisfaction seems to be more important to most men than it is to some women. A woman may not as often be interested in sexual activity unless her emotions and mood are inclined to it, which is less often than a man would want. That means that a husband may often be discontented while his wife does not understand his need. She may even despise male sexual desire because of previous abuse that she experienced or observed. A husband should try to be patient and understanding of his wife. But a wife should realize that it is good for her to meet the sexual need of her husband even at times when she does not feel the need herself. If a man is faithful and devoted to his wife, without wrong relationships with other women, he may feel resentment when his wife does not care about his need. A husband’s faithfulness to his marriage commitment should never depend on his physical satisfaction, but his wife’s attention to his sexual needs can lessen his struggle with temptation.

Song of Solomon points out, “My beloved is mine, and I am his... **Come, my beloved**, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages... there I **will give you my love**. (Song of Solomon 2:16; Song of Solomon 7:11-12, emphasis added; see also 1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

## RESULTS OF DISOBEDIENCE TO GOD’S INSTRUCTIONS

The descriptions in these paragraphs do not apply to every conflict in marriage, but they are common. These descriptions show the natural behavioral cause-and-effect cycles that happen when spouses respond to their feelings *unspiritually*, instead of (1) recognizing what they are feeling, (2) remembering God’s truth and what he wants for them, and (3) depending on the Spirit to help them respond in Biblical ways.

If a wife is not walking in the Spirit and letting God’s love work through her she may react in natural ways that harm her marriage. If a wife does not feel loved, she does not feel secure. She begins to assert herself and resist her husband’s authority because she does not trust him to care about her. When she does this, he feels disrespected. If he tries to assert authority and demand respect, she feels even more that he does not love her.

If a husband is not walking in the Spirit and letting God’s love work through him, he may fail to have the attitude that strengthens his marriage. When a husband feels disrespected, he feels hurt and angry. He may say hurtful things to his wife. If he is trying to control his feelings, he may become silent. He does not want to be near his wife or open his heart to her, because he feels that she is not an ally. When he does this, his wife doesn’t understand why. Maybe she treated him disrespectfully because she was trying to make him realize that she was not happy and that he should change. When he becomes angry or withdraws,

she thinks he is confirming that he does not care about her feelings. She may become even more disrespectful.

A person becomes more vulnerable to temptation when the marriage relationship is damaged. The wife is tempted to be more resistant to her husband's leadership. She is tempted to talk to others about him disrespectfully. She may be tempted to enjoy the attention of another man who seems to appreciate her. The husband is tempted to stay away from his wife because her behavior offends him. He does not feel like doing loving actions for her. He may be tempted to enjoy the attention of another woman who admires him.

Each person is responsible to God for choices. God will not excuse a person's sin because of what a spouse did. God promises the strength to help us live as we should. The purpose of this information is not for a person to demand what is needed from a spouse or to blame a spouse for one's own sin. The purpose is so that a person can realize the responsibility to please God and give what a spouse needs.

## WRONG GOALS

Sometimes a person looks for a way to make his life easier. A husband wants to make his life easier by causing his wife to change. Likewise, a wife may think her life would be better if her husband would change. A person asks a counselor or pastor or friends how to change the other person. Changing one's spouse is not the right goal. A person who tries to make his life easier by using relationship techniques is not motivated by love for God or the other person.

Sometimes a person tries for years to correct the faults of the other person. They never stop criticizing the same faults. Even though every person has real faults, each spouse must eventually accept the spouse with the faults. Faults may be personality flaws, character flaws, or spiritual flaws (even sin). The relationship should not depend on the willingness of the other person to change. He may feel unable to change. Whatever the reason is that he does not change, each spouse should show love and respect, valuing the person even with his faults.

## CONCLUSION

God designed the natures of men and women, and he designed marriage to meet human needs. However, we live in a world where marriages and families are very damaged by sin. Each of us is individually damaged by our own sins and the sins of others that have affected us. We cannot experience marriage as God intended without grace that changes us and helps us show grace to others. We need the cleansing of God's Spirit in order to have motives that are pure, love that is strong, and humility that serves.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What are some concepts in this lesson that are new to you? How do you plan to change your attitudes and behavior?
- » What can the church do to strengthen marriages?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for designing the marriage relationship to meet so many special needs. Thank you for giving us instructions for marriage.

Help us to have the love and understanding to care as we should. Help us to have families that demonstrate your love in the world.

Thank you for your grace that helps us to love as you do.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. At the beginning of the next class, write or recite the passage from memory.
2. Write a two-page paper describing the needs of either the husband or the wife. Give examples of behavior by the spouse that helps to meet those needs. Use scriptures to support each of the needs you discuss.



## LESSON 8

# THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES PART 1

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the characteristics and behaviors of real love.
2. Explain what it means to love someone unconditionally.
3. Discuss the importance of expressing love in someone's primary love language.
4. Use words of affirmation to express love and appreciation for a family member's personal qualities, character traits, and personality traits.

### JOSEPH AND HANNAH - A DEVELOPING MARRIAGE

Joseph was frustrated because his wife was unhappy. He did not understand what she wanted from him. Joseph worked hard and provided his wife and children with a home and food and everything necessary for life. He allowed his wife to buy anything she wanted. His wife did not have to worry about anything. What more could a wife want? Joseph felt that his wife did not appreciate his work.

Hannah was unhappy because she wanted Joseph to show his love by thinking of special things to do for her. Her favorite gift from Joseph was a small wooden plaque with her name that Joseph made for her in his shop. Instead of his telling her to buy whatever she wanted, she wished he would buy flowers for her sometimes.

Joseph and Hannah talked about their feelings and began to understand each other's needs.

## WHAT IS REAL LOVE?

- » What does it mean to truly love someone?
- » A student should read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 for the group. From this passage, list love's attributes and actions. List the things that love is not and what love does not do.

| 1 CORINTHIANS 13 LOVE |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| What Love Is Like     | What Love Does        |
|                       |                       |
| What Love Is Not Like | What Love Does Not Do |
|                       |                       |

It may seem like from this passage that love is known for what **it is** not more than for what **it is**. But the descriptions of what love **is not like** teach us about what love **is like**. If love is not arrogant, then what it is? It is the opposite. Love is humble.

- » Now list the opposites for each of the things that are not true of love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and written in the table above.

| What Love Is Like | What Love Does |
|-------------------|----------------|
|                   |                |

Real love:

- Is not merely a feeling (though feelings often accompany love).
- Is given by choice, not because of requirement.
- Is a commitment.
- Is sacrificial.
- Is unconditional; it does not depend on the other person's actions.
- Is intentional, not accidental.
- Costs something.
- Seeks what is best for the other person.
- Expresses itself by giving.

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**You can give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving. Love will cost you something.**

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“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son...” (John 3:16). True love expresses itself by giving. This isn’t always the giving of a tangible, material gift. Sometimes the gift is loving words. Sometimes the gift is time: being with someone and being available to them. Sometimes love is given through acts of service or a loving touch. God the Father loved us so much that he gave us the best that he had, his only Son, so that we could become his children too. When we truly love others, we will also give.

Real love is unconditional. It is not dependent on the behavior or worthiness of the one being loved. It does not say, “If you do this and please me in this way, I will love you; but if you do that and displease me, I will not love you.”

Conditional love says, “If your behavior pleases me, I will reward you with expressions of love that are meaningful to you. But if you do not do what I want, I will withhold meaningful expressions of love.”

Genuine love is unconditional. It will express itself no matter what the recipient does or doesn’t do. It will express itself even when the recipient is unable to respond in love; when he has nothing to give in return.

It is important to realize that loving someone unconditionally doesn’t necessarily mean we give them what they want. It doesn’t mean we remove the consequences of their wrong behavior. It does mean that we always try to do what is best for them. It is difficult to watch a loved one suffer, but if they are doing wrong, the experience of suffering is often the only thing that can turn them away from their destructive behavior. Sometimes what is best for our loved one is that they be allowed to struggle. At other times, it is best for us to help



them out of their struggle. We often need godly counsel and the help of the Holy Spirit to know what we should do in these situations.

- » What would motivate us to love others with unconditional love?
- » A student should read Romans 5:8 for the group.

Many people feel that God's love is based on their performance. Because of this, they do not understand why they should love other people unconditionally. But Romans 5:8 tells us that God already loved us when we were his enemies. He gave us the Savior when we were sinners. His love for all people is unconditional. His love is not based on your behavior or perfection. God loves you for who you are as a person, made in his image.

He wants us to love others in the same way he loves us (John 15:12, Ephesians 5:2, 1 John 4:11). The primary reason we must love others unconditionally is that God calls us to (Matthew 5:43-48, 1 Peter 4:8).

## PEOPLE FEEL LOVED IN DIFFERENT WAYS

God loves variety. He gives people unique personalities. No two individuals have exactly the same way of thinking and of communicating their feelings. Because of differences in personality, our family members have needs somewhat different from ours. Our differences daily affect family relationships.

One of the ways in which individuals differ is in how they express love and in what makes them feel loved, appreciated, and secure in their relationships with others.

There are many ways to express love, and many ways to make people feel loved. Gary Chapman lists five general categories of expressions of love.<sup>34</sup> He calls them the Five Love Languages. Each of these ways of showing love is a whole system of behavior, not just an individual action.

Though everyone needs to be loved in all five ways, it seems like most individuals feel more loved with one kind of expression than they feel with other types of expressions. The other expressions of love do not mean as much to them.

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34 Many ideas in this section are based on the work of Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, (Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 1995)

## The Five Love Languages

People show love through:

1. Words of affirmation
2. Quality time
3. Gifts
4. Acts of service
5. Physical touch

Likewise, people recognize and receive love in those five ways.

### A Primary Love Language

Most people naturally recognize and express love in primarily one or two of those five ways. If family members are not expressing their love for a spouse or child in that person's primary love language, that spouse or child may not feel loved, though they are being shown love in other ways.

A particular woman may primarily express love by giving her time to the ones she loves. She tries to be available to talk to and interact with those she loves. She takes time for doing activities together. Likewise, because that is the primary way she shows love, it is the way she most easily recognizes others' love for her. She feels most loved when someone gives her their time. If her husband buys her gifts or does something for her, it does not mean as much to her as when he spends focused time with her.

A particular man may primarily show love through physical touch. He hugs his wife and children and is happy when they hug him and want to be close to him. He may hug his friends or at least pat their shoulders or push or scuffle with them affectionately. He may appreciate his wife's hard work for their family, but the work is not what makes him feel like she loves him. He feels loved when she sits beside him and lets him put his arm around her, or when she touches him in various affectionate ways.

A vehicle has a fuel tank. When the tank is empty, the vehicle does not function. When a person receives love in the way he recognizes and needs love, it provides emotional fuel. When a person's emotional tank is full, he has confidence and energy for challenges. He is more able to cooperate with others. He is more able to resolve conflicts. He feels motivated to improve and achieve.

When a person does not receive love in the way he needs, he lacks emotional fuel. A person rarely makes great efforts for accomplishment or improvement if he does not feel loved.

If we do not frequently show our family members love in their primary love language, they may not realize how much we love them. This is true, regardless of how much we feel that we love them. We must communicate our love in a way they understand.

If we are hurtful to someone in their primary love language, it is even worse. For example, if words of affirmation are the most important way we can show love to our child, our critical words hurt the child more than if he had a different primary love language.

## GROWING THROUGH OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

In Lesson 1, we learned about how God made all people for relationship with himself and with others. Expressions of love are an important part of every relationship. It is important for us to understand the ways in which our spouses, children, and other immediate family members feel most loved. This knowledge enables us to express our love for them in ways that are the most meaningful to them individually.

Marriage is rarely exactly what people expect it to be. People are often disappointed by differences between themselves and their spouses. When it comes to expressions of love, it may seem that the best situation is for both people to have the same primary love language. Many misunderstandings and frustrations could be avoided if they were similar in this way. However, differences such as these can strengthen marriages if spouses are committed to their marriage and to growing in their love for one another.

The process of trying to understand each other, adapt to each other, and show care in meaningful ways develops each person and becomes a wonderful demonstration of real love. As we serve our family members by demonstrating love to them in ways that make them feel loved, we grow in our understanding and character.

When it comes to expressing love to our spouses and other family members, it is important to realize that we cannot express love only in our own way, or express love only when we feel like it. Love is a choice and a commitment, motivated by the value of the relationship. In some cases, we will have to learn new ways of showing love. Maybe we did not grow up in a family that expressed love in a particular way, but a family member today needs to be loved that way. In situations like this, expressing love in an unfamiliar way may feel strange or uncomfortable to us at first, but we can learn! It is important to never act like it is an unpleasant duty or inconvenience to demonstrate our love. If it seems like we are acting out of obligation, our expression of love will not communicate real love.

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**“And may the Lord  
make you increase  
and abound in love for  
one another and for  
all, as we do for you.”**

**1 Thessalonians 3:12**

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- » Students should read Romans 12:9-10, 16 and 1 Peter 3:7-8 for the group. From these scriptures, name several reasons we should care about which ways our family members feel most loved.

**It is important to remember that love is a self-sacrificial commitment to seeking another person's greatest good.**

We are born with a self-centered nature. Real love for others does not come naturally to any of us. Real love is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (Romans 5:5). As believers, we must learn to have Christ's way of thinking, as Paul described in Philippians 2. When we do, we will:

- Not be motivated by selfish ambition (verse 3)
- Not have an inflated view of our own importance (verse 3)
- Consider others more significant than ourselves (verse 3)
- Look out for the interests of others (verse 4)

We must make a commitment to grow in our love for our family members. We should learn to notice their needs and look for ways to meet them. Our goal should be to show our love for them in the ways they feel most loved.

We as parents should also teach our children to be considerate of their siblings, parents, and grandparents in these ways. Our children need to learn to love and serve their families. They can learn how to express love for their family in the most meaningful ways. We must teach by example. We should also take time to explain these concepts to them and guide them in making applications in their relationships.

- » What are some ways parents can help their children learn this self-giving love for others, starting with their own family?

## LOVE LANGUAGE 1: WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

People whose primary love language is words of affirmation feel most loved when others use words to sincerely express appreciation for them. If a woman's primary love language is words of affirmation, her husband could express his love for her while talking to her or about her. He could write a note to her, telling her some specific reasons he appreciates her. He may talk to someone else about his wife's good character or work. When his wife hears his words, she feels loved and valued.

We can ask our friends for advice in a way that affirms their value. For example:

- "You always add a helpful perspective, so I want to get your thoughts on this..."
- "You are experienced in this matter, and I would love your advice."

- “You know a lot more about \_\_\_\_ than I do, so if you have any suggestions or recommendations for me, I’d be happy to hear them.”

All words of affirmation must be spoken in sincerity. Otherwise, they are useless or even hurtful. Words of affirmation that are not sincere weaken relationships. They are not based on truth, so the hearer cannot trust the speaker’s motivation.

Sincere words of affirmation are true to reality. They are not fake or exaggerated. Sincere affirmation is expressed from the heart. What is said is what the speaker truly feels and believes.

Words of affirmation can motivate the hearer to further growth and future success but should never be manipulative. We should not try to control others with words of affirmation.

- » A student should read Ephesians 4:29 for the group. What description is given here for things that should not be said? What should our words accomplish? Are some words appropriate in one situation and not another?

What we say to others should always be appropriate and gracious. The things we say should give God opportunities to work in the lives of those who we are speaking to. What we say should be constructive, not destructive. It should promote health and healing, and never be damaging.

## Topics of Affirmation

There are different types of words of affirmation. Not all words of affirmation are of the same value or importance. Higher quality words of affirmation require more thought and effort from the person giving them; it may even feel awkward to say them at times; but those words communicate love in the strongest, most meaningful ways.

### Complimenting Appearance

Complimenting someone’s appearance can be one way of giving affirmation, especially if it shows appreciation for their effort or the way they express their personality. However, complimenting someone’s appearance is shallow affirmation, especially when it doesn’t relate to the essence of the person.

Exceptionally attractive people who have often been complimented tend to become insecure about their appearance, because they begin to feel that their value depends on it, and they think it should be perfect.

Personal worth is not determined by attractiveness. Also, there are limits to what individuals can do to improve their physical attractiveness. Because of these things, this kind of affirmation should not be overused.

### **Commending Accomplishments and Service**

Another way to affirm someone with words is to commend him for his accomplishments and performance. The person who is speaking takes time to express appreciation for what the other person has done, instead of taking their action for granted.

Examples:

- A wife commends her husband for achieving a difficult goal that he was working towards.
- A husband notices and thanks his wife for what she did to help him with a project he was working on.
- Family members compliment the cook who made a delicious meal for them to enjoy.

When complimenting performance or accomplishment, try to avoid making the person think that your love depends on that person's performance. For example, to tell your son you are proud of him because he scored well on a test could make him feel that you will love him less if he scores lower. One way to affirm the value of the person is to say "I'm happy that you did well on that test. I'm proud of you for taking responsibility to study and do your best." But however you do it, don't fail to compliment accomplishments that are important to them.

### **Recognizing Character and Effort**

It is best to affirm a person's character and the effort that made him successful rather than just affirming good performance. For example, a child athlete should be commended more for his diligent effort and good attitude than for winning a game. Few people can always excel in performance, but a person can choose to show good character, and character is most important.

### **Celebrating Someone for Who They Are**

The best affirmation recognizes someone's characteristics: personal qualities, character traits, and personality traits. This kind of affirmation is stronger than affirmation of accomplishments because it is based on the value of the person himself, not on changeable circumstances.

Examples:

- “Children are drawn to you! You are so good at explaining things to them, and you are so patient with their questions.”
- “I confide in you, because I have found that you are trustworthy.”

Closely related to this type of affirmation, is recognition of how God is working in someone’s life, enabling them to be a certain way or do a certain thing.

Examples:

- “I love to see how God is using you in the lives of the young people you are mentoring. One of them told me that she wants to live for Jesus because of watching your life!”
- “I believe God is going to help you with this challenging task you’ve been assigned. I will be praying for you!”

Expressions of joy and thankfulness for the person’s presence and relationship are some of the strongest words of affirmation. They express the value of the person.

Examples:

- “Family gatherings are always more special when you are there.”
- “I love being with you.”
- “You are precious to me, and I love you!”

## Important Notes Related to Words and Affirmation

1. Never criticize or ridicule a person’s physical characteristics. People carry physical characteristics with them throughout life. Never give someone a nickname based on a physical characteristic, especially a flaw.
2. Affirming strengths, qualities, and good behavior motivates the hearer to continue and grow in them. Pointing out flaws rarely helps.
3. Giving advice can imply fault in the hearer. Affirmation can help a person feel safer while receiving advice. If you need to give someone advice, offer strong affirmation along with the advice.
4. Suggestions in the form of complaints do not motivate. For example, saying that a task should have already been done, or expressing embarrassment over someone’s failure to do it, is not helpful. These statements make the person feel like he has already failed; if he does the task late, he will still feel that he failed.

## Hurtful Words

The person who most needs words of affirmation is most hurt by the opposite kind of words. Criticism is particularly painful and makes him doubt his value as a person. Rash, angry words cause emotional injury from which a person may never completely heal. This is especially true when the speaker does not understand the pain his words caused and never apologizes.

Just as the strongest words of affirmation relate to a person's value, so the worst, most hurtful statements are a personal attack. For example, "I wish I had never met you."

The next worse statements are those that declare something about the person's essential character "You are \_\_\_\_." Damaging statements about behavior include those that start with "You always \_\_\_\_" or "You never \_\_\_\_." Those statements imply that the person is unlikely to improve because of essential, unchangeable flaws.

If someone is wounded—especially if he is wounded in his primary love language—he will naturally try to retreat from further injury. People who use negative words are usually not generous with positive words, so the hearer has little hope that he can earn better treatment by changing his behavior. He will not be motivated to improve his behavior so that he can earn love.

Sometimes people who are angry say hurtful things because they want to hurt someone. Other times, the speaker has good intentions, yet their words are still hurtful. Some people use negative words to try to force someone to have better behavior, but that almost never works.

- » A student should read Colossians 3:8 for the group. Believers must not continue to sin against God and against others in these ways.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » In your own words, describe real love. Why must the Holy Spirit help us be able to love others as we ought?
- » Explain what it means to love someone unconditionally. What is the significance of God's unconditional love for you?
- » Why is it especially important to express love for your spouse or child in their primary love language?
- » How has receiving words of affirmation been helpful to you?



- » How have you demonstrated your love for your family members with words of affirmation this week?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for teaching me about true, unconditional love. Thank you for describing it in your Word and for demonstrating it through your love for me.

Help me learn to love and serve my family as Christ loved and served me. Enable me to focus on the well-being of my spouse, children, siblings, and parents.

Thank you for reminding me of the importance of the words that I say. I am sorry for the words that I have said that have been hurtful to others and dishonoring to you. Please help me to remember that my words must be affirming, constructive, and healing.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Talk to a couple with a strong marriage, asking them questions to learn from their lives. When you have finished the conversation, write two paragraphs about the insights they shared and anything that you want to apply in your own marriage.

Here are some ideas of questions to ask:

- What are some differences between your personalities that have affected your relationship?
  - How have each of you grown because of these differences?
  - How have you had to adjust your expectations, perspective, and behavior so that you could honor and serve each other?
  - What are some practical ways you demonstrate your love for one another?
  - What does your spouse do or say that helps you know you are loved?
  - How has your relationship with your spouse affected your relationship with God?
2. In Proverbs 31:10-31 the writer includes many words of affirmation for his wife. The descriptions of her behavior and words tell us about her character. For what kinds of things does he affirm his wife? Look in the passage for these things:
    - Her appearance
    - Her accomplishments and service
    - Her character and effort
    - Who she is as a person
    - Who she is as a believer

What can we learn from what is emphasized in this passage?



# LESSON 9

## THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES PART 2

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the five languages in which love is expressed.
2. Discuss dangers related to misuse or neglect of each of the five love languages.
3. Describe the benefits of a child's emotional tank being full.
4. Identify the primary love languages of immediate family members.
5. List specific ways to demonstrate love to family members in each of the five love languages.
6. Commit to demonstrating love for family members in their primary love languages.

### INTRODUCTION

In the last lesson, we learned about self-giving, unconditional love. We also learned that there are at least five different ways (languages) in which love can be expressed. Most people naturally recognize and express love primarily in one or two of those five ways.

We discussed words of affirmation and discovered practical ways to communicate our love to family members. In this lesson, we will learn about the other four love languages, then make specific applications for demonstrating our love to our children.

## LOVE LANGUAGE 2: QUALITY TIME

People whose primary love language is quality time feel most loved when others purposefully set aside time to be with them. This time is carefully reserved for being together, focusing on one another. It is time for enjoyment and fellowship.

Quality time is not accidental or spare. If you are stuck in traffic or waiting at an appointment, you should use the time wisely, but that time is not usually the same as purposeful quality time together. A spouse or your child may work on a project with you, and that is valuable, but that time together may not always meet their need for quality time with you.

An uninterrupted conversation is one of the best forms of quality time. In such a conversation, each person is attentively listening to the other. Each person dismisses interruptions such as text messages and phone calls so that he can focus on the other person and on the discussion.

Here are a few other ways that you can show you are attentively listening:

1. **Maintain eye contact.**
2. **Listen actively.** Respond to what the other person is saying. Don't just think about what you want to say next. Instead, take the time to check your understanding of what the other person is thinking and saying. You can confirm that you understand correctly by saying something like "If I am hearing you correctly, you feel that..."
3. **Don't interrupt.** The hearer often thinks he understands the idea and then quickly interrupts to give his opinion. This makes the speaker feel like the hearer did not take time to really understand.
4. **Listen for feelings, not just facts.** When we try to understand another person's perspective, we show them that we think they are valuable. By listening with our hearts, we are communicating that their opinions and feelings are important to us; and that they themselves are important to us!

The best quality time is when you are not doing anything but communicating with each other, but other forms of time together are also valuable. Families can spend quality time together every day during a mealtime, purposefully focusing on one another as they eat together.

Reading stories to young children, playing together, or doing something recreational together are other ways that families can spend quality time together. Doing a project or craft together that is just for fun, not for school, or work, or ministry, is also quality time.

When someone is away from family, quality time can be spent together by visiting on the phone.

Quality time is reserved, undistracted, unhurried time to focus on each other and enjoy each other's companionship. It is best to reserve some quality time with one's spouse and children every day.

## When Time Isn't Reserved

When a spouse or parent is a ministry leader, it is especially difficult to reserve quality time with family. Pastors' children often feel that anyone else can call and get their father's attention, but he is too busy to take time for them. It may seem that family time is usually sacrificed for sake of ministry.

Interruptions are not completely avoidable for a person in ministry, but you must try to reserve time for your family. If you do, they are more likely to understand your regular obligations and the extra, unavoidable interruptions that come up.

The person whose primary love language is quality time feels least loved when he does not have purposeful, focused time with his family. He feels most hurt when quality time is not prioritized, and when plans for quality time are set aside when interruptions arise. It is hard for him when his family is too busy to spend time with him. He feels less valuable when family members do not listen to him with undivided attention.

If you are failing to give your spouse or child personal attention, they may not feel the love you have for them, even though you are doing things for them. A man may be working hard for his family, yet his wife may feel unloved because he is too busy for time with her.

A young boy went to his father to tell him a story he had recently heard. The father was reading a book, but paused to listen for a minute, then went back to reading his book while his son was in the middle of the story. For the rest of his life, the boy remembered how he felt in that moment.

- » What does quality time usually look like for your family? What difficulties do you have to overcome so that you can spend meaningful time together?

## LOVE LANGUAGE 3: GIFTS

People whose primary love language is receiving gifts feel most loved when others give them something that shows they were thinking of them.

Gifts that cause someone to feel loved are gifts that are given thoughtfully. They are chosen with the recipient's interests in mind. They are not necessarily practical or needed. Gifts

of love are not given just because the giver did not want them anymore. Gifts should be purposefully selected or made by the giver.

A gift that makes someone feel loved does not have to be expensive. It can be something that lasts for a moment, such as special food or candy; or it can be an enduring visible reminder of the relationship with the giver. For someone whose primary love language is receiving gifts, birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays are very significant. It is especially important for family members to remember these days with a special gift for this person. To not receive a gift on these special days is particularly painful for this person.

Gift-giving must not be limited to special days, though; it should be an on-going way of life. The spouse, parent, or child of someone whose primary love language is receiving gifts should make a habit of looking for gifts that will help their loved one remember they are thought about and loved.

A wife whose primary love language is receiving gifts could feel very unloved if she thinks her husband tried to save expense by getting her something for a gift that was necessary anyway. Maybe she needs a new broom, and he gives her one. It is good for her to have a new broom, but that gift will not help her to feel loved.

Gifts are significant when they show that the person understood and cared about the recipient. They are significant when they were not necessary. A gift is significant when some thought, effort, and cost went into it.

Children whose primary love language is receiving gifts feel more loved when their father buys ice cream for them than when he pays their school bill, even though the school bill is much larger and more important. Rather than demanding that family members appreciate what you routinely provide, find ways to do something that is special to them.

Some people make their children or spouse beg for everything. A person who is frugal and rarely buys things for himself may not find it easy to be generous and give gifts that seem unnecessary. He doesn't want his family members to begin to expect gifts. But if he has a spouse or child to whom gifts are significant, he should work to overcome his natural tendency. He must try to see gifts as they see them—as important and worthwhile. When giving gifts, give freely, with joy!

- » A student should read 2 Corinthians 9:6-9 for the group. In this passage, Paul is urging the Corinthian believers to give generously to their fellow believers who are in need. From these verses, try to identify four or five motivations for generosity. In what way do the principles from this passage apply to generosity within our families?
- » What place does gift-giving have in your family? Do you experience any difficulties in expressing love through giving gifts? What are the difficulties and how can you overcome them?

## LOVE LANGUAGE 4: ACTS OF SERVICE

People whose primary love language is acts of service feel most loved when others do things for them.

Acts of service meet practical needs. They may or may not be things that the person was unable to do for himself. Service can be as simple as getting someone a drink. It might be taking care of someone who is sick. It might be helping in a situation of need.

In most families, there will be long periods of time when one family member needs constant personal care. Because of the family's love and commitment to the person, they continually perform many acts of service. Even though so much time is devoted to acts of service, family members should remember to demonstrate love in other, more meaningful ways as well, especially if this person's primary love language is not acts of service.

Some acts of service are typically routine and can easily be overlooked or taken for granted. Many women are expressing love through their daily cooking and housekeeping. A man may work to provide for his family. If you are already serving your family in everyday ways like this, you still should look for special ways to do acts of service for a family member with this primary love language.

When a wife shows no interest in her husband's small needs, she is failing to speak this love language. Maybe she thinks, "He can get a drink of water for himself." But if she got the water for him, it would express to him her special love.

Likewise, a husband should show consideration. When he gives his wife a break from a task she usually does, by doing it for her, he is honoring her role and recognizing that her work is strenuous and important.

A husband may feel that he already works enough, and that it is his wife's job to take care of all household chores. He may even think she ought to be more efficient than she is. If he assumes that tasks at home are beneath his dignity, it shows that he considers women to be inferior and deserving of lesser tasks. Women are not inferior, and household work is not more lowly work than work outside the home.

A man may feel that he is taking the role of a servant (below his wife) when he helps at home, but that is not true. If he volunteers to help, he shows the value of the task and the value of the person he is helping. His service honors the person who normally does the task and shows his appreciation for them. His wife will not see him as more of a servant but as more respectable.

If people help reluctantly and grudgingly, they imply that they are being forced to help. Their act of service does not communicate love. If they do acts of service cheerfully and put forth their best effort, it shows that they are freely choosing to serve, because nobody



can force them to serve like that. This glad service communicates their love clearly. It also helps them to earn the respect of their loved one.

- » When is it hardest for you to serve your family? How does thinking about service as an expression of love change your perspective?

## LOVE LANGUAGE 5: PHYSICAL TOUCH

People whose primary love language is physical touch feel most loved when they are lovingly touched by their family members.

There are different ways to show affection through physical touch. Some are appropriate in some relationships and in certain settings but are not appropriate in other relationships. Here are a few examples:

- Hugging each other
- Putting an arm around someone's back or shoulder
- Resting your hands on someone's shoulders
- Patting someone's back or shoulder
- Sitting together
- Holding hands with each other
- Kissing each other
- Giving a back massage
- Holding a child
- Tousling or combing a child's hair
- Giving tender, gentle care when one is sick or has other physical weakness

Physical touch can also be especially meaningful when someone is going through a difficult time. During times of grief, pain, loneliness, or depression, a hug can be more meaningful to someone whose primary love language is physical touch than any words or acts of service.

For the person whose primary love language is physical touch, it is important to keep expressing your love physically even when they are sick, if it is possible. Remember that love is unconditional and self-sacrificial. The father in Luke 15:20 hugged and kissed his repentant son, though his son was stinky, dirty, and unlovely in every way.

The love language of physical touch is not necessarily about sex. Sexual activity is a category of touch. The desire to touch and be touched may prompt and be expressed in sexual activity, but sexual activity alone will not be sufficient for a person whose primary love language is touch.

The desire to feel loved through physical touch can make a person feel tempted to immoral sexual activity. It is important for parents to give sufficient expressions of appropriate,

non-sexual physical touch to their sons and daughters, so that their children's physical touch needs are met. A child who feels loved has a stronger encouragement to resist temptation.

## Sins of Physical Touch

Those whose primary love language is touch are especially violated by physical roughness. Striking out at someone in anger (Galatians 5:20), slapping someone's face to humiliate them (Matthew 5:39) or beating someone as a misuse of authority (Matthew 24:48-49) is evil. Because of these scriptures, we know that parents never have the right to hurt their children, even if they feel angry or frustrated. God also says it is evil for children to hit their parents (Exodus 21:15).

Appropriate, controlled, physical discipline of children given by parents in a spirit of gentleness (Colossians 3:21), for the purpose of correction and instruction in righteousness, is not sinful. Instead, it is God's requirement of parents, enabling them to rescue their children's souls (Proverbs 13:24, Proverbs 19:18, Proverbs 29:15, Hebrews 12:5-7).

All sexual immorality and abuse, including incest (Leviticus 20:11-12, 14) is evil.

## IDENTIFYING YOUR PRIMARY LOVE LANGUAGE

People are not always aware of their primary love language. They might not think about the ways that they most often express their love to others. They might not be aware of what others do that makes them feel loved. Take a moment to reflect on what you know of the five love languages.

- » With what love language do you most naturally and most often express your love for others?
- » What are your primary and secondary love languages? If you are having trouble discerning which expressions of love mean the most to you, here are some questions to help you:
  - What are examples of things that make you happy?
  - What are your favorite memories?
  - What do you complain about (even silently)?
  - What feels hurtful to you?

## THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES AND CHILDREN

All people need to regularly receive expressions of love in all five love languages, but this is especially true for children. To become balanced, emotionally healthy children, they need to be consistently and frequently told and shown that they are unconditionally loved by

their parents. When parents demonstrate their love for their children in a variety of ways many times each day, it is like gentle, nurturing rain on the soil of their children's hearts.

Do not assume your children know and feel your love for them. They must frequently and regularly see your love demonstrated in their primary love language as well as the other love languages.

## Determining a Child's Primary Love Language

Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell list these ideas for how you can discover your child's primary love language:<sup>35</sup>

1. Observe how your child expresses love to you.
2. Observe how your child expresses love to others.
3. Listen to what your child requests most often.
4. Notice what your child most frequently complains about.
5. Give your child a choice between two options.

It may not be possible to determine a child's primary love language before the age of five.

## Special Notes on the Love Languages for Children

We will not go into detail about each of the love languages here since each were previously discussed. Instead, we will only note a few special implications and applications for showing love to children.

### Words of Affirmation

It feels particularly difficult to give affirmation when someone is mostly doing wrong or not performing well. But if you can find something sincere and affirmative to say it will motivate your children, and it is more likely that they will be able to grow.

### Quality Time

It is very beneficial for families to eat together at least one meal a day and focus on visiting with each other during that time.

In families with multiple children, it is easy to neglect quality time with an individual child. However, setting aside time to do something special with individual children will help them to feel your love for them. Time alone together also gives them a safe opportunity to share

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35 Dr. Gary Chapman and Dr. Ross Campbell, *The Five Love Languages of Children*, (Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 1997), 101-103.

personal thoughts that they may be reluctant to share in front of their siblings or other family members.

Oftentimes, children will suddenly request quality time alone with one of their parents. Sometimes at bedtime a child will be open and want to talk about something that is burdening their heart. It is very important for parents to take the time to listen to their children in these moments. Many times, a child is dealing with a spiritual matter, and by privately coming to his mom or dad, he is seeking spiritual help. Parents have a special opportunity to lead their children to Jesus in these times.

In your quality time with your children, learn to ask them open-ended questions that will help you understand how they are thinking and what they are feeling. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with “Yes” or “No.” Open-ended questions do not have a particular answer. Open-ended questions usually begin with “Why...” “How...” or “What...”. Open-ended conversation starters begin with phrases like “Tell me about...” or “What do you think about...”

As your child answers your question, be sure to attentively listen to their answer and respond appropriately. In some cases, you will want to ask a follow-up question. At other times, you will want to clarify to make sure you understand what they are trying to explain. Sometimes you should affirm them in what they are perceiving or feeling. It is important that the child not feel like they are being interviewed, but that the conversation be natural. Your attentiveness will help your child feel heard, valued, and loved.

Taking time to really listen to a child tell a story also communicates your love for them in a way that is very meaningful for them. Taking time to tell children stories or read books to them is also a great way to share quality time together.

Playing games together or working on a fun project together are other ways to share quality time with your children.

Some parents do not give their children adequate quality time. They try to compensate for this by giving their children gifts. Gifts cannot replace quality time. Children need much quality time with their parents, no matter what their primary love language is. No number of gifts will substitute for spending time with your children.

## Gifts

Many parents rarely buy their child a toy or interesting book, because those things don't seem necessary. Those things can be helpful for the child's development, besides being an expression of love.

## Acts of Service

Some ideas for expressing love to your child in acts of service:

- Prepare their favorite meal for their birthday
- Give them tender care when they are sick
- Help your child with a school project
- Do household tasks with your child and express your appreciation for their work
- Do something helpful with your child for someone not in your household

## Physical Touch

All babies and little ones must experience love through physical touch. Infants have practical needs, such as being fed and getting their diapers changed, but they also need to be held, cuddled, caressed, and kissed. This gentle physical touch communicates love in a way they feel and is essential to their emotional and mental health.

For a dad to scuffle with his sons can be an expression of love. The competition should not be hurtful, dominating, out of control, or causing anger.

## Long-Term Effects of a Parent's Actions and Words

Parents must follow God's example in their dealings with their children. He always attends to his children with perfect, self-giving, unconditional love. He disciplines, corrects, and trains his children **because of** his love for them (Hebrews 12:5-7). It is in the context of a father/child relationship that he works in believers' lives to make them like himself (Hebrews 12:10-11).

It is not appropriate for parents' love for their children to be conditioned on the behavior of their children. Of course, positive rewards or negative consequences for behavior are an appropriate part of child-training, but *expressions of love* should not be given or withheld because of behavior.

If a child consistently experiences the unconditional love of his parents, he will more easily understand and trust God's love for him. However, it is more difficult for those who were abused or neglected as children to understand and trust in a loving heavenly Father, even after they are grown.

Children's understanding of themselves—especially their value as individuals—almost always comes from what they hear and perceive from others. Their parents' actions and words are the most influential, but relatives and friends have a large impact as well. Whether or not children receive the expressions of love that they need is part of what forms their

self-image. When love is withheld from children, or children experience emotional or physical abuse, it damages their view of their self-worth in a way that affects their whole life.

Parents' words influence children's understanding of themselves. For example:

- **Words of affirmation:** "I'm proud of you for working so hard! I know you can do it!" This tells children that effort is worthwhile, and that you believe they can be achievers.
- **Words that are destructive:** "You are so lazy. I can't depend on you for anything!" This could lead a child to believe they are incapable of changing; there is no reason they should try to change or earn your respect, because you've already given up on them. It could make the children feel that you have rejected them.
- **Words of affirmation:** "It's okay. We all make mistakes sometimes, and then we learn how to do better next time." This tells children that it is safe to make mistakes—your love for them is not dependent on their perfect performance. It also tells children that they should expect to be able to grow, there is a reason to keep trying.
- **Words that are destructive:** "You are so stupid. You always mess up." This could lead a child to believe it is hopeless to try. It could easily communicate to them that their value is dependent on perfect performance; and since they always mess up, they are incapable of ever having value. They won't ever be worthy of being loved... by you or anyone else.

A child's understanding of himself as a person is shaped by the love that is communicated or withheld from him. His ability to relate to others in healthy ways is either developed or handicapped by his relationship with his parents. The child who is loved well can learn to love other people with self-giving, unconditional love. He also has a reservoir of love from which to draw.

Real love is emotional fuel for children, just as it is for adults.

## Benefits of a Full Emotional Tank

There are many ways children benefit from having full emotional fuel tanks. When children know they are loved, they have the strength and stability they need to face challenges and develop properly.

Children who know they are loved unconditionally are emotionally secure. Because of this, they are more ready to accept discipline, correction, and guidance from their parents than they would be otherwise. They are also more able to resist temptation caused by peer pressure, because they are secure in who they are and do not need to prove themselves to others.

A girl who usually flirts with boys may behave that way because she fears that they will not like her or pay attention to her otherwise. A girl who is shy with boys may fear that they won't like her if she truly expresses her personality. Daughters who receive affirmation and affection from their fathers can more likely interact with boys in healthy ways without being flirty or shy. They are secure in their identity because of their father's love.

Genuine, unconditional parental love expressed frequently in all five of the love languages protects children from much harm. Children who are loved well do not usually seek love and security from others who intend to harm them.

In summary, there are many benefits of having a full emotional fuel tank as a child:

- Right understanding of one's worth and the source of it
- Right understanding of effort, mistakes, growth, and unconditional love
- Ability to learn to love others well
- Strength and stability for facing challenges and developing properly
- Emotional security
- Ability to accept discipline, correction, and guidance
- Ability to reject the wrong influences of peers
- Being less likely to be abused in future relationships

» What other ways have you seen children benefit from being well loved?

## Disadvantages of an Empty Emotional Tank

Children who do not feel loved may resist guidance because they lack motivation to please their mother or father. Without a full emotional fuel tank, many children lack a strong, positive connection of loyalty with the parent who is trying to lead them.

Children whose emotional fuel tanks are empty are far more vulnerable to abuse than children in healthy, loving relationships with family members. Because they do not feel loved, they may seek love from people who want to use them or harm them.

## QUALITIES OF STRONG FAMILIES

In these lessons we have learned about five primary love languages. Even though individuals usually have one or two primary love languages, every person needs to regularly be loved in all five ways. A healthy family is one in which each person purposefully nurtures relationships with others by daily speaking affirmative words, spending quality time together, serving, and providing loving touch. Giving gifts to one another may not be a daily occurrence but is still an important part of healthy relationships within a family.



- » How is love most often expressed in your family? Is love expressed in all five love languages? How frequently are expressions of love shared?

A nonreligious 25-year study of 14,000 families showed that many healthy, successful, and balanced families from different cultural backgrounds share six common qualities.<sup>36</sup> Some of these qualities directly relate to the various love languages, which seems to emphasize the importance of different expressions of love. Stinnett and Beam listed those six qualities and descriptions for each:

1. **Commitment.** Members of strong families are dedicated to promoting each other's welfare and happiness. They value the unity of the family.
2. **Appreciation and affection.** Members of strong families show appreciation for each other often. They can feel that their family is good.
3. **Positive communication.** Members of good families have good communication skills and spend large amounts of time talking with each other.
4. **Time together.** Strong families spend time—quality time in generous quantities—with each other.
5. **Spiritual well-being.** Whether they go to religious services or not, strong families have a sense of a greater good or power in life. That belief gives them strength and purpose.
6. **The ability to cope with stress and crisis.** Members of strong families are able to view stress or crisis as opportunities to grow.

## PERSONAL APPLICATION

We have considered many things in these two lessons. We began with a discussion of genuine love, then recognized five languages in which love is usually communicated. We learned about emotional fuel tanks and the need our family members have to experience our love for them in their primary love language. We talked about how personality differences within a family can cause us to grow in love.

After that, we explored each of the five love languages in-depth, looking at examples of each, and the damage that is caused when each is neglected or abused. We learned about how children benefit from having full emotional fuel tanks, and how they suffer when their tanks are depleted. We talked in more detail about expressing our love to our children.

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36 Dr. Nick & Nancy Stinnett and Joe & Alice Beam, *Fantastic Families: 6 Proven Steps to Building a Strong Family*, (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2008)



Then, we noticed how the practice of the five love languages is linked to the six common qualities of healthy families.

As we conclude these lessons, we will discuss your personal responsibility—what you can do and what you should do with what you have learned.

### **1. You are responsible to love your family.**

You should be willing to change in whatever way is necessary without waiting for your family members to love you. Real love does not wait until the other person shows love to you. It expresses itself even when the other person seems least deserving, because love is not based on the worthiness of the recipient.

### **2. You are responsible to do your best to express your love for your family in the ways most significant to them.**

It is likely that you will have to put extra effort into demonstrating love in one or more of the languages that do not come naturally to you. At first, some of the expressions of love may feel unnatural, awkward, or silly to you.

Learn to notice opportunities to show love to your family members. Become alert to what your family members may need at a given moment. Here are some examples for each of the love languages:

- **Words of Affirmation:** Think, “\_\_\_\_\_ probably feels uncertain about what he just said. But he was right in what he said. I need to say something affirming.”
- **Quality Time:** Ask, “Would you like to talk about it?” Then stop what you are doing, give them your full attention, and show with your body language that you are really listening.
- **Gifts:** As you hand them the gift say, “I saw this and it made me think of you.”
- **Acts of Service:** Jump up and ask, “Could I get that for you?” or “Could I help you with that?”
- **Physical Touch:** Go over to them and say, “You look like you could use a hug” as you wrap your arms around them.

### **3. You are responsible for your emotions.**

God designed you to need to be in healthy relationships with others. But whether or not that is possible, God himself is your ultimate source and satisfaction. Your family is not ultimately responsible for your emotional well-being. God loves you perfectly, though no one else ever could. He can make up for any lack you may have, as you abide in his love (John 15:9-11).

Your family may not express love for you in your primary love language. Perhaps they are unaware of your primary love language and your emotional needs. Perhaps they lack motivation to express love for you in the way that is most significant to you. You may be able to explain to them how you feel most loved. But you cannot make them choose to express love for you in that way.

Perhaps your family is expressing their love for you in other ways. As you become aware of the love languages, you will begin to notice the ways your family is already showing their love for you. While you cannot change them, you can choose to accept their expressions of love and demonstrate your appreciation for that love.

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving me my family. Help me to value each one of them as I ought to, and to nurture a good relationship with each one of them.

Thank you for the opportunity to consider ways I can show my love for my family. Help me learn to be like Jesus: to give of my time, emotional and physical energy, and resources to bless and encourage my family. Help me to have a humble heart, so that I will prioritize others' needs over my own. Help me be aware of the opportunities I have to express my love for each family member.

You have shown me what real love is. You expect me to make the same commitment of love to my family that you have made to me. I choose to love my spouse and children with an unconditional, self-giving love. Give me grace and mercy for the many ways I have failed. Enable me to love them as I should.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Think about the likely primary love languages of your spouse and each of your children. List your family members' names. Then list the primary one or two love languages of each.
2. Which expressions of love will require extra effort on your part? Mark those. Write down some ideas for how you will begin to intentionally express your love for your family in those ways.
3. Examine your culture, especially your own social group. List the five love languages. In your culture, how are each of the love languages demonstrated? Are there any of the five that are usually ignored? What are some specific ways people in your social group could demonstrate love in better ways than what is usual in your culture? Write several paragraphs answering these questions.

## LESSON 10

# THE ISSUE OF CHILDLESSNESS

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand and respond to barrenness from a biblical perspective.
2. Value each person as one who bears God's image.

### BUSABA'S SORROW

Busaba was born in an Asian country. She was happy when she married a young businessman, and they expected to have a happy life together. Several years passed, and Busaba had no children. A doctor told them that Busaba would be unable to have children. Her husband was very sad and angry. Finally he made the decision to divorce Busaba and marry another woman. Busaba is now old. She lives in a small house alone and has no relatives involved in her life. Because she is Buddhist, she hopes that someday in a future life she will have children and her shame will end.

- » If you were a pastor in Busaba's community, what would you say to her? What is the Christian message to Busaba?

In this lesson we will look at a biblical perspective on the issue of childlessness.

### CHILDREN AND GOD'S PROGRAM OF BLESSING

Immediately after God created the first man and woman, he told them to have children and multiply the human population and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28).

In the Old Testament, God sometimes promised blessings not just to an individual but to many generations of a family. For example, God promised blessings to Abraham that would not come to Abraham personally but to later generations. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be like the sand of the sea in quantity. Abraham's son Isaac was conceived miraculously. Then as the family multiplied with each generation, the increasing numbers demonstrated that God was fulfilling his promise.

In Exodus 23:25-27 God told Israel that he would bless them as they advanced into their new territory. God promised Israel he would bless their food, take away sickness, allow no barrenness or miscarriages, and destroy their enemies. These promises depended on Israel's obedience, and God described his requirements (such as the command in Exodus 23:32). The promises were made to the nation and not to individuals. Individuals would be affected by the general obedience or disobedience of the nation. For example, a person might be sick, or a woman might be childless, not because of their own sin but because they were in a nation that was not faithful to God. Therefore, a childless woman may not be suffering a consequence of her own sin.

Deuteronomy 7:12-15 is a passage with promises to the nation of Israel. There would be prosperity, no sickness, and no barrenness for humans or animals. Verse 12 says that the Israelites would receive these blessings if they obeyed God because God made a covenant with their fathers. A person in Israel could be poor, or a woman could be childless, if the nation were not faithful to God.

Children were important to God's plan for his people. In other parts of this course, we talk about how children should be valued because they are made in the image of God. Every child is valuable and should be treated with love and care. However, sometimes people feel that a child is valuable because he can keep the family strong in the future. Sometimes a father values children because they are an extension of his own identity. We need to remember that God gives children for his own purposes (Malachi 2:15).

» The group should look at Psalm 127:3-5 together as someone reads it aloud.

This passage in the Bible says that children are a blessing from God. They are like an inheritance that God blesses. They are a reward from God. They are the future protection and security of the family.

Two blessings that are sometimes spoken of together in scripture are long life and grandchildren. Job was blessed because he had ten children and lived long enough to see four generations (Job 42:13, 16). The blessing of Psalm 128:6 is the gift of living to see your grandchildren.

God blessed the family of Jonadab with the promise that there would always be a man to lead the next generation of the family (Jeremiah 35:19). God promised the family of King David that they would always have a man to sit on the throne (2 Samuel 7:16).

So we see that God's blessings for a family usually include children, and children are a way that God's blessings are extended into future generations.

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDLESSNESS

Childlessness in some cases may mean that God has cursed a family. The Bible tells us of cases where God cursed families with barrenness. For example, because King Abimelech did wrong, God stopped all the women of his household from having children until he corrected his wrong (Genesis 20:18). The women were not the guilty ones, but they experienced the result of the king's sin.

After Adam and Eve sinned, God said that the world would be affected by their sin. The curse included difficult human relationships, pain and sorrow in childbearing, difficult work, the earth's resistance to cultivation, and finally death (Genesis 3:14-19). Every human since Adam has experienced the curse from birth, even before committing any sins personally. Even Jesus, who was absolutely sinless, entered creation with a human body that endured conditions of the curse. Therefore, we should not say that an individual's suffering is because of his own sin. We all age, we get sick, we suffer in many ways, and finally die. These problems, along with problems with childbearing, are all results of the first sin of Adam.

Besides the original sin of Adam, we are affected by the sins of our ancestors, because their actions created the society we are born into. We are affected by the sins of our family, community, and nation. Believers everywhere in the world endure conditions created by a society they do not control. A family may experience poverty because they are in a place with little freedom and opportunity. A baby can be born with a physical defect though he has not made any choice to sin (John 9:1-3).

We do not know God's reasons for giving parents children or allowing a couple to be childless. Sometimes people who live in careless, rebellious sin have many children and do not raise them in a way that glorifies God (Psalm 17:14). Sometimes faithful believers do not have children. Certainly we should not assume that a particular person's sin has resulted in childlessness.

We know that God can intervene with healing and blessing any time he chooses, but in general, believers endure the conditions of the world. We wait in faith for the time when God will renew his creation (Romans 8:18-23).

It is not fair to blame a woman for being childless, as if her own sin caused a curse. Likewise, when a baby dies before birth, the death usually is not because of anything the mother did. Individuals suffer in many ways because of Adam's sin, the sins of others, and the general condition of the world. Because everyone has sinned, humanity shares together the guilt for the world's condition, but individuals suffer in various specific ways.

## GOD'S MIRACLES

Jesus showed the love of God when he healed and did other miracles. Throughout the history recorded in the Bible, we see many examples of God's miracles for his people.

God wants us to live happily and without suffering in a world of beauty (Genesis 1:28, 31, 1 Timothy 6:17). However, God's first priority is to save us from sin so we can enjoy an eternal relationship with him. The salvation of sinners takes time because people must make the decision to repent and believe. If God ended all suffering now, few people would repent, because they would not understand the evil of sin. So right now, suffering in general must continue while the gospel is preached throughout the world. We cannot expect miracles to solve all of our problems and take away all of our suffering, though God does miracles for us occasionally. Ultimately, all suffering will end for those who come into relationship with God. But in the meantime, God grieves with us in our suffering (John 11:35) and comforts us in many ways (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

One of God's miracles is to make a childless woman a mother of children (Psalm 113:9).

The Bible records at least six times when God gave a son to a childless woman. Though God has performed this miracle many other times, these six times were recorded because the children were important in history. Isaac was born to Sarah (Genesis 21:1-3). Jacob and Esau were born to Rebekah (Genesis 25:21, 25-26). Joseph was born to Rachel (Genesis 30:22-24). Samson was born to the wife of Manoah (Judges 13:2-3, 24). Samuel was born to Hannah (1 Samuel 1:20). John was born to Elizabeth (Luke 1:13, 57).

In each of these six cases, the couple had experienced sorrow because the wife was childless. In the biblical record, God did not blame anyone for the woman's lack of a child. The Bible gives no implication that God was displeased by either parent. Luke 1:5-7 says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, completely obeying his commandments, yet they were childless until old age. There is no record that any of the parents in these six accounts repented or confessed sin as they prayed for a miracle. God's messages to the parents do not mention any reason that they had not had children already. These cases illustrate the fact that people should not be individually blamed for childlessness.

It is appropriate for us to pray that God will give the blessing of children, but ultimately, we must accept God's decision. We should not assume that it is God's will to give a child in every case, just as God does not heal every case of sickness or take away every kind of suffering.

The Apostle Paul prayed three times about something he said was like a thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). We don't know what the specific problem was, but it seems like it was something physical. It was something that he hoped God would change, so he prayed for a miracle. God told him that instead of removing the thorn, he would give grace that would be greater than the weakness. Paul said that this specific weakness would bring glory to God because it helped him show God's power. Paul went on to say that he would

be happy about weaknesses and sufferings, because they provide a condition so that God can be glorified.

The Apostle Paul was a man of great faith, but he did not always receive the miracles he wanted. He accepted God's will. Though we always prefer a miracle of blessing from God, we must accept God's decisions. Sometimes he is more glorified by the way he works through our weaknesses.

- » Give an example of a time when God showed his care in your life without doing a miracle you hoped for.

## CULTURAL RESPONSES TO CHILDLESSNESS

Cultures are not all alike in how they value children. In some countries, families want to have many children. The children can help with the work that supports the family. The members of the extended family, with cousins and uncles and others, protect and care for the members when needed. Each wife in the extended family wants to add members by having children. A man who has many children, especially sons, is important in the extended family. The family is expected to take care of elderly family members.

In other countries, most families live in cities or towns and are supported by the father's and mother's employment. In the city, children are less able to help support the family. Children may be expensive to support and educate. Over time, as families live in the city for several generations, they may want fewer children. Many urban families want only one or two children.

The value of children is so strong in many cultures that every couple must have children in order to feel respected and valued. A childless woman feels that she is failing in her most important role. A woman who never marries feels ashamed because she does not have children and was not chosen to be someone's wife.

In many cultures families want to have sons to lead and strengthen the family in the next generation. Daughters are valued much less. Baby girls may be aborted or abandoned. Some countries have made it illegal to find out the gender of an unborn baby because so many families kill unborn daughters. We know from scripture that girls have dignity and value equal to that of boys, because they are all made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, families who are following Christ ought to equally value both sons and daughters, no matter what is normal in their culture.

If a family has a strong need to be proud of a child, they may reject a baby who is handicapped physically or mentally. In some countries, many handicapped children are in orphanages because their parents didn't want them. This treatment of children is wrong,



because they are made in the image of God and are precious in his sight, regardless of their capabilities or limitations.

In some cultures the practice of polygamy is based on the value of children. A man wants to multiply his children by having several wives. The Bible tells us that God's plan is for a man to have one wife (Genesis 2:22-24, 1 Timothy 3:2).

The Old Testament records times when a wife would give a female servant to her husband in order to have children. The wife gained status from her servant's children. Rachel and Leah, wives of Jacob, each gave a female servant to Jacob in order to gain status through more children.

The use of servants for adding children caused complicated relationships. Sarai gave Hagar to Abraham, expecting that her own status would be better if Hagar had a baby (Genesis 16:2-6). Hagar became pregnant and felt superior to Sarai. Sarai punished her severely, trying to establish her own authority.

Lelia was born in a West African country. After being married three years she still had no child. In Lelia's culture, adopting a baby does not take away a woman's shame of not having a baby of her own. Lelia found a woman in a poor village family who was pregnant and arranged to buy her baby. Lelia wore something under her shirt to make herself look pregnant for several months. When it was time for the baby to be born, Lelia pretended to go away to a hospital for childbirth, then came home with the baby from the village.

If a family wants children primarily for their benefit to the family, they may fail to value a child as a human being made in the image of God. They may refuse to love and accept a handicapped child. They may reject a daughter because they want a son. They make a childless woman feel ashamed and worthless. They do not see the value of adopting orphans or homeless children. All of these attitudes and actions are selfish and wrong. We insult our Creator when we treat individuals badly for any of these reasons (Exodus 4:11, Proverbs 14:31).

Henry VIII was king of England from 1509-1547. He desperately wanted a son. Because his wife had a daughter but not a son who survived, Henry divorced her and married another woman. When his second wife failed to have a son, he accused her of treason and ordered her execution.

Medical science has proven that a man's sperm determines the gender of a child. The woman's body does not determine whether she will have a son or daughter. However, many men have been angry at their wives because they have daughters and not sons.

A man named Joseph and his wife had two daughters. When Joseph's wife went to the hospital to deliver her third child, Joseph hoped for a son. The third child was a daughter. Joseph was so angry that he refused to go to the hospital to visit his wife or to pay the hospital bill.

In Job 24, Job gave a long description of the actions of an evil man. One action mentioned is that the evil man treats a childless woman badly (Job 24:21). God is not pleased when a childless woman is treated unkindly.

- » How does your culture value children? What are some reasons that people want to have children?
- » What injustices happen because of customs in your culture?

## WHAT GOD SAYS

In the six accounts recorded in scripture when God gave a son to a childless woman, the parents were not blamed in any way for previously being childless. In fact, the couples were specially chosen by God to be parents of special sons. Zechariah and Elizabeth were called righteous (Luke 1:5-6). We should never assume that a woman is childless because she has not pleased God.

Job 24:21 says that mistreating a childless woman is the action of a wicked person. God does not judge or mistreat the childless woman, and neither should we.

In Isaiah 56:4-5 God speaks to the man who is unable to father children. God says that if this man obeys God and lives in his covenant, he will have a position and a reputation that is better than he would have from having sons and daughters.

The Apostle Paul called himself the father of Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2) and Titus (Titus 1:4) and Onesimus (Philemon 10). He called himself the father of the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 4:15). He was not their biological father, but their spiritual father. To be their spiritual father was more important.

Matthew 12:46-50 tells us of a time when Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him while he was teaching. Jesus asked his listeners, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" He then said that the people who do the will of God are his brothers, and sisters, and mother. We know that Jesus cared about his family; even on the cross he arranged care for his mother (John 19:26-27). But Jesus was saying that spiritual family is even more important than biological family.

The family of faith does not replace the biological family, but a person's place in the family of faith gives him or her the most important identity. The terms *brother* and *sister* used in the church show the importance of the relationships in the family of faith (Colossians 1:2).

Deborah was a prophetess who served as a judge for Israel (Judges 4:4). Deborah also led the nation of Israel through a war for freedom from an oppressing nation. In Judges 5:7, Deborah

called herself a mother in Israel. The Bible never mentions Deborah's biological children, but she was a mother for Israel because she cared for the people with her leadership.

The Apostle Peter said that women who follow the example of Sarah are her daughters (1 Peter 3:6). Imagine the great status that is given to Sarah with that statement! This is a status based on her example of faith and obedience, not her role as mother of Isaac.

All people who have been saved by grace through faith are called children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). Abraham is given high honor as the father of millions of believers. From the examples of Abraham and Sarah we see that God highly honors spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

The Apostle Paul described the advantages of being unmarried. The unmarried person can focus on pleasing God without many other responsibilities (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). Even though the unmarried person is childless, Paul said that singleness is best if the person can live a life that is pure. Because of these statements, we can be sure that singleness is God's will for some people.

Like singleness, there are advantages to childlessness. Just as God has special opportunities for those who are single, he has opportunities for those who are married but childless. Though they did not choose to be childless, they should do their best to work for God.

In singleness, childlessness, and any other condition we have, we can trust that God will work through us to bring spiritual benefits to us and to others (Romans 8:28).

There are many children who lack caring parents. It is likely that nobody will serve this need in their lives unless some individuals or couples in the family of faith make an effort to show love to them.

We are called to present our bodies as sacrifices to God, to live in devotion to God (Romans 12:1).

## SUMMARY POINTS

1. Children are a blessing from God, and it is right for a couple to pray that God would give them children.
2. It is wrong to assume that it is always God's will to miraculously give a child. He does not always choose to give a child, just as he does not always do a miracle for every other need.
3. It is wrong to blame a woman or couple for childlessness. The human condition has been affected by the sin of Adam, the sin of our ancestors, and the sins of our society.
4. We should equally love and value both sons and daughters because they are people made in the image of God.

5. A person can be a spiritual father or mother who influences many generations even without biological children.
6. God gives special opportunities of ministry to unmarried and childless people.
7. We should devote ourselves to God and glorify him in the conditions he chooses for us.

## THE PASTOR'S MINISTRY

Unfortunately, churches in many places have followed their own cultures more than God's Word when they deal with the issue of childlessness.

A pastor should teach his people to view childlessness with a biblical perspective, especially as summarized in the previous section.

If the pastor is praying for a miracle for a childless couple, he should not put the responsibility for faith on the wife or husband. When Jesus healed a small child or raised the dead, the person healed or raised did not have faith for his own miracle. If the pastor is confident that God wants to do the miracle, the pastor should have faith and not blame the wife or husband for a lack of faith.

In Romans 12:15, we are told to weep with those who weep. A pastor should be aware of the grief of the people in his congregation. He should take the initiative to encourage and comfort those who are grieving because of childlessness or the loss of a child. Parents grieve even if the child was unborn. Remember that both the wife and the husband are suffering, even though they show it in different ways. A pastor should not wait for grieving people to come to him for counsel. A pastor should teach his congregation to be encouraging and supportive of each other.

The pastor should lead the congregation in building relationships and caring for childless older people. Members of the family of faith should treat them as parents or grandparents by showing love, spending time together, and helping with practical needs.

The pastor should help unmarried and childless people to find ways to serve and bless the church and community. The pastor should affirm the importance of every person in the family of faith.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » How do people in your culture view children? How do they view childlessness?
- » How do believers in your culture view children? How do believers in your culture tend to view childlessness?

- » How has your understanding of barrenness changed or been challenged by studying the scriptural principles presented in this lesson?
- » Are there any couples who may be struggling with infertility within your church family? If so, how can your church be supportive and provide a safe place for them to share their struggles?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for Christian families. Thank you for husbands and wives who are living for you, and for what they contribute to your kingdom.

We pray for those couples who are experiencing barrenness. We pray that you will comfort and encourage their hearts. Help them to know that your love for them is steadfast, regardless of their inability to have children.

If it is your will for them to have biological children, we trust you to make it possible in your time. Whether or not you give them their own children, help them to be spiritual fathers and mothers to others.

Help all believers to value each person as those made in your image.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a two-page paper in which you:
  - Describe your society's perspectives regarding children and barrenness.
  - Explain scripture's teaching about children.
  - Explain scripture's teaching about barrenness.
  - Explain from scriptural principles why a married couple should not be blamed for their barrenness.
2. Encourage those dealing with barrenness.

Option 1: Describe in writing how you can demonstrate your compassion and care for someone you know who is dealing with the grief of barrenness. Be specific in naming some things you could do or say that would be a blessing to your brother or sister in Christ.

Option 2: Write a short note of encouragement to someone you know who is dealing with the grief of barrenness. Try to understand what they are experiencing. Let them know that you care about how they are feeling. Tell them you are praying for them. When you give them the note, be available to listen to them or demonstrate your care for them in an appropriate way.

## BIRTH CONTROL

Before continuing to Lesson 11, the class should **study and discuss Appendix B**. This is a brief discussion of birth control, an important topic related to marriage and family.



## LESSON 11

# THE DEVELOPMENT AND CARE OF A CHILD

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Appreciate God's wonderful work in creating each person.
2. Believe that human life is sacred.
3. Be motivated to protect human life from the moment of conception.
4. Understand the importance of parental care for the healthy development of children.

### THE TINY TWINS

Mark and Mary lived in the country of India. They had been married for a few years without having children when they were suddenly offered an opportunity. One of Mary's relatives had given birth to twin girls and felt unable to take care of them. Mark and Mary accepted the gift of the two little babies with great joy, but they faced difficulties. The babies had been born too early and weighed about three pounds each. The new parents had to figure out how to feed and care for the tiny girls. They spent many nights with little sleep, but the girls lived and grew to be wonderful, healthy children.



## A BABY

### Development of a Baby During Pregnancy

- » A student should read Psalm 139:13-18 for the group.

This passage tells us that God knew us from the time we were conceived in the womb, even before our bodies were formed (verse 16). God knew you and had a plan for you before you were born.

The moment the sperm of a man unites with the egg of a woman inside her, a child is conceived. At that moment, a new human life — a new person — exists! All of the genetic information for that person exists in that one new cell. Within 24 hours after conception, that cell divides into two cells. Each of those cells divide into two more cells. The number of cells continues to multiply as each cell divides into two. Within about a week, the child, now many cells, is attached to the inside of its mother's womb, where it continues to grow and develop. Each of the cells contains the "code" for making that person (DNA). The cells follow the instructions of the code and specialize to form each part of the body.

By week 3, the baby's spinal cord and brain have begun to form. Around week 4 of the pregnancy, the baby's eyes begin to form, the heart begins to work, and the baby's arms begin to be formed. By 12 weeks of pregnancy the baby's body has every essential organ.

By 14 weeks after conception, a baby's unique fingerprints are completely formed. By 16-24 weeks of pregnancy, a mother can feel her child moving in her womb. Around weeks 26-28 the baby's lungs are developed enough to breathe, and the baby weighs about two pounds. Babies are usually born around 38-40 weeks after conception. Every baby is a marvelous, special creation made by our Creator God.

- » A student should read Ecclesiastes 11:5 for the group.

It is truly miraculous how God creates, forms, and develops a baby in its mother's womb. People can never fully understand the processes or all that is involved. Yet, across all continents, societies, and cultures, the development of human beings follows the same sequence and pattern. The Creator's design is perfect!

- » A student should read Job 10:8-12 for the group.

In these verses Job uses analogies that refer to conception and the development of a child in his mother's womb. Job tells us that the Creator God is the giver of life.

## The Value of Being Made in God's Image

Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 9:6 tell us that we are created in the image of God. All human life is sacred. Because of this, it is sinful to murder any human being (Genesis 9:5, Exodus 20:13).

In Ezekiel 16:20-21, 36, 38 God speaks strongly against those who would end the life of a child. He warns the Israelites about child sacrifices to idols and declares their judgment is severe.

In Isaiah 46:3-4, God speaks of his care of humanity throughout the stages of human development when he states:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

What a beautiful promise!

All people have value, including unborn babies, the handicapped, those with special needs, and the elderly. A person's value does not depend on what he can do or whether or not he could survive if he was alone. Every person has value because all people are created in the image of God.

The Bible tells us that each child is precious in God's sight from the time of conception (Psalm 139:13-18). Because of this, we know that we are human beings from the moment of conception. To intentionally end a pregnancy through abortion is to murder a human being.

There are at least four ways followers of Christ should work to protect the lives of unborn children and minister to mothers.

1. They should influence their governments and their nation's court systems to make laws and pass judgments that protect unborn babies from being killed.
2. They should give practical help to pregnant women who feel that abortion is their only option, so that they will feel able to protect their children's lives.
3. They should care for unwanted babies.
4. They should offer grace and spiritual help to women who are suffering from the guilt of past abortions.

## Care of an Unborn Child

It is important to realize that the child a mother carries in her womb has an eternal destiny. That person will exist forever. Because of this, parents must care for their children in all aspects of their lives: physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual!

» A student should read Matthew 18:2, 10 for the group.

A man's behavior can affect the health of his unborn child and can even prevent him from being able to become a father in the first place. Alcohol, cocaine, or smoking can damage male sperm and increase the possibility of infertility (conception being impossible) or miscarriage (a baby naturally dying during pregnancy).

A pregnant mother's use of harmful substances, such as drugs (prescribed or illegal), alcohol, or cigarettes, may permanently harm her baby. Such substances hinder the development of the baby and cause the baby to be born with physical or mental problems.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most important times during the development of an unborn child is when the organs and tissues are first developing, especially between weeks 3-4 of pregnancy. During this time, many women do not yet know they have conceived a child!

» A student should read 1 Corinthians 10:31 for the group.

Though a mother cannot control the health of her unborn child, she should help the child as much as possible, by making sure she is getting good nutrition and avoiding harmful substances. God says that children are precious, and we glorify God when we treat them that way.

It is a tragedy when a baby does not live until birth. Usually the death of an unborn child is not a result of anything that the mother did. There is a great sense of loss for the parents, and other believers should try to comfort them during that time.

## Birth

While there are unique cultural customs related to the birthing experience, much about giving birth is the same for women everywhere in the world. In Genesis 3:16, God stated: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children..."

Centuries have passed, and God's words are still true all over the world. The effects of the first sin of Adam and Eve are still felt in the birthing process. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not exempt, but experienced the pain of childbirth.

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37 Greg Cook & Joan Cook, *The World of Children*, 3rd ed. (Pearson Education, 2013), 85.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD

### Physical Development

A child develops physical abilities in predictable stages. A baby will first hold its head up, then sit, then crawl, then walk. When any of these do not happen within an expected time frame, parents are concerned. As children continue to grow, we expect to see them jumping, climbing, and running by ages 4-5. They progress from only drinking milk to eating solid foods. Family members cheer and encourage these natural physical developments of their child.

### Mental Development

Caregivers listen for the first cries of a newborn and anticipate a baby making happy sounds at approximately two months of age. Next, the baby babbles and begins to repeat sounds. Parents are excited over a child saying “Mama” or “Daddy” at around six months of age. Children are usually speaking words by the time they are one year old and are speaking full sentences by age two.

Small children surprise us with the things they remember. They ask many questions. They always remember if you promised to do something special with them. Their mental development happens because of God’s design, but the nurturing of parents and other caregivers makes a great difference in helping children develop to their full potential.

### Social and Emotional Development

Children need their parents to help them be healthy so that they can develop physically. However, they need encouragement for their social and emotional development even more. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers should intentionally help each child develop socially and emotionally.

As parents do the things shown on the following list, their children are helped to develop and mature socially and emotionally.

- » Read through this list. Then go through the list a second time. Beside each item that you as a parent are already trying to do well, write an example of a specific way you are doing that. Put a checkmark beside those that you have not been purposefully working on. Beside each of those, write something that you could begin to do. If you are not a parent, you could select items in the list that you could work on for children who are your relatives or who are close to your family.

## Ways You Can Help Your Children Mature<sup>38</sup>

### 1. By caring for yourself

- Manage your personal stress.
- Manage your family's resources.
- Offer support to other parents.
- Ask for and accept support from others when needed.
- Recognize your personal strengths and parenting strengths.
- Have clear purposes in setting child-rearing goals.

### 2. By being understanding

- Observe and understand your children and their development.
- Recognize how children influence and respond to what happens around them.

### 3. By guiding

- Model appropriate, desired behavior.
- Establish and maintain reasonable limits.
- Provide children with opportunities to learn responsibility. (The opportunities should be appropriate to their stage of development.)
- Teach problem-solving skills.
- Pay attention to children's activities.
- Oversee children's communication and experiences with other children and with adults.

### 4. By nurturing

- Express affection and compassion.
- Cultivate children's self-respect and hope.
- Listen to and attend to children's feelings and ideas.
- Teach kindness.
- Provide for the nutrition, shelter, clothing, health, and safety needs of children.
- Celebrate life with children.
- Help children feel connected to family history and cultural heritage.

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38 Adapted from Charles A. Smith, et al., *National Extension Parent Education Model*. (Manhattan, Kansas: Kansas Cooperative Extension Service, 1994). Retrieved from <https://www.k-state.edu/wwparent/nepem/nepem.pdf> on July 31, 2023.

### 5. By motivating

- Teach children about themselves, others, and the world around them.
- Stimulate curiosity, imagination, and the search for knowledge.
- Create beneficial learning conditions.
- Help children process and manage information.

### 6. By advocating

- Find, use, and create community resources to benefit one's own children and the community of children.
- Stimulate social change to create supportive environments for children and families.
- Build relationships with family, neighborhood, and community groups.

## Spiritual Development

Because God created us with spiritual life (Genesis 2:7), we should teach our children the faith and lead them to live in relationship with God.

- » Students should read Psalm 78:5-8 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9 for the group. In what ways are you obeying God's command to teach your family diligently? What are some areas in which you need to develop?

We must take seriously God's commands about teaching our families. Otherwise, we fail to live in obedience to God, and our children will also reject God's authority.

There are various forms of teaching children, including: Bible reading, singing songs of Jesus, scripture memorization, prayer, using questions and answers to teach, and having daily conversations. Participating in a church is also important for the whole family.

Sometimes a parent may hold children as they go to sleep, singing songs about faith and Jesus' love for us. Children develop stronger faith when they hear about God's love and faithfulness while experiencing the loving care of their parents.

## CONCLUSION

When you are a parent, your days are long. They are busy; they are tiring; they are not your own. However, in the midst of the crying, spilt milk, dirty diapers, and never-ending daily routines, take time to pause and gain perspective. Remember that you are caring for one of God's children, who he, in his eternal plan, entrusted to you. He is not asking you to have a perfect house, an impressive budget plan, fancy meals, or expensive clothing for his children. What he is asking from you is this:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What aspects of child care are often neglected in your community?
- » What difficulties do families face? Why is it not easy for them to provide the child care that is described in this lesson?
- » How could believers help pregnant mothers care for themselves and their unborn babies?
- » What ways could Christian families work together to bless the lives of small children and their mothers?
- » How could the church organize a ministry that cares for the needs of small children?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We worship you, our wonderful Creator. You formed us in our mothers' wombs and have cared for us throughout our lives. You knew everything about us even before we were born.

Help us to do what we can to protect vulnerable people, including those who are still in their mothers' wombs. Bless those who are ministering to pregnant mothers.

Thank you for trusting us with the privilege and responsibility of having and raising children. As you create and develop our children, help us to be attentive and diligent in our care for them and our training of them.

We want to be obedient to you in how we raise our children. Help us to represent you well to our children. Enable us to teach our children to love and obey you.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read 2 Timothy 1:3-5; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-23. Write a paragraph answering these questions:
  - Which two women are mentioned and what was their role within a family?
  - What influence did they apparently have on Timothy?
  - What impact did their influence have in the life of the early church?
2. Review the scripture passages you have memorized during this course: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Romans 6:11-14, Colossians 3:5-7, and the verses you selected for memorization in Lesson 5, Assignment 4. How are these verses impacting you as you work through them?
3. Memorize Psalm 78:4-8. At the beginning of the next class time, write or quote the passage from memory.
4. Pray specifically for each person in your family in their personal needs. Pray for yourself.





# LESSON 12

## PURPOSEFUL CHILD-RAISING

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the responsibilities God has given parents.
2. Understand the importance of early character development.
3. Be equipped to intentionally plan for the development of children in nine areas of life.
4. Explain the interaction between a child's free will and outside influences on the child.
5. Commit to faithful discipleship of children.

### JONATHAN EDWARDS, FATHER OF A FAMILY LEGACY

Jonathan Edwards was a respected pastor and theologian who lived in the 1700s. He and his wife Sarah were the parents of eleven children. Sarah was a wonderful wife and mother, having a tremendous influence over her children's character formation. Jonathan himself was a dedicated father. We are told that "every night when Mr. Edwards was home, he would spend an hour conversing with his family and then praying a blessing over each child."<sup>39</sup>

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39 This quote and the information for this section came from Larry Ballard, "Multigenerational Legacies – the Story of Jonathan Edwards," YWAM Family Ministries, July 1, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.ywam-fmi.org/news/multigenerational-legacies-the-story-of-jonathan-edwards/> on January 11, 2021.

A. E. Winship, an educator of the late 1800s researched the legacy of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, tracing the lives of their descendants to 150 years after Jonathan's death. He found that the Edwards' legacy included:

- 1 United States vice-president
- 1 dean of a law school
- 1 dean of a medical school
- 3 United States senators
- 3 governors
- 3 mayors
- 13 college presidents
- 30 judges
- 60 doctors
- 65 professors
- 75 military officers
- 80 public office holders
- 100 lawyers
- 100 pastors/church leaders
- 285 college graduates

How is such a fruitful legacy possible? What was invested in the lives of the eleven Edwards children that produced descendants renowned for their integrity, responsibility, leadership, and service to society? Surely Jonathan was a godly and diligent father who was a faithful example for his children to follow.

The Bible shows us that the choices of parents affect their children's relationship with God over future generations.

» Students should read Deuteronomy 5:9-10 and Deuteronomy 7:9 for the group.

No matter what choices one's parents have made, every person has the opportunity to serve the Lord and be a godly parent for their own children. You and your descendants can faithfully serve the Lord and experience his blessings and grace. Are you willing to commit to being a parent who serves God faithfully and leads your children to know him too?

## A CHILD'S INTRODUCTION TO GOD

When God first spoke to Jacob, he did not say, "I am the God of the universe," or "I am the God who created the world," though those would have been true statements. He said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Genesis 28:13). Jacob did not start his relationship with God without any previous knowledge of God. He knew about God because of the teaching of his father and grandfather.

Abraham began a tradition of worship of God. Many others believed in God because of Abraham, even before they had a personal encounter with God. When Abraham's servant Eliezer prayed, he spoke to the LORD, God of his master Abraham (Genesis 24:12).

God was later identified many times as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God Jacob” (Exodus 3:15, for example). Joseph, in the next generation, referred to promises God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 50:24). Joseph expected his family to be faithful to God because of God's promises to the previous generations.

- » From the way God identified himself, what do we learn about the way people come to know God?

People do not usually come into relationship with God only from hearing doctrines about God. Usually people learn about God by observing the lives of people who are in relationship with God. **The greatest spiritual influence comes from parents who are devoted to God.**

Here are some very important personal questions for consideration: What do your children learn about God by observing your life? Do your children want to be faithful to God because they see your relationship with God?

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS

God gives parents a great responsibility. “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

Parents should be purposeful in teaching their children to follow God. Parents must understand their responsibility to guide and train their children.

The responsibility for training children belongs first to parents, not to society, school, or church. A parent should make sure that his children are in the church, but he should not assume that the church will train his child for him.

- » A student should read Ephesians 6:1-4 for the group. What are fathers supposed to do?

Child training is not only the responsibility of the mother. The father has the ultimate responsibility for the spiritual protection of his family.

Parents have a serious responsibility to train their children for life. To be trained for life does not mean being trained for an occupation; it means being trained to live right, a life that God will bless. Parents should not let their children follow sin, hoping that they will be converted later.

Scripture warns us not to learn the wrong philosophies of the world.

- » A student should read Colossians 2:8 for the group.

This scripture warns us that we can be robbed by believing a wrong philosophy and accepting a wrong lifestyle. The world may rob us of our children by teaching them to follow the ways of the world instead of following Christ.

It is best if the entire education children receive is from Christian teachers and parents. In places where Christian schools are not available, parents should still make sure the child is learning the right view of life. Secular education may teach the child atheism, evolution, and humanism. Children are especially vulnerable to false teachings (Ephesians 4:14), and parents must protect their children. Pastors should learn how to preach doctrine that protects people against wrong philosophies. Pastors and teachers should provide families with information to help them establish their children in truth.

## EARLY TRAINING

- » Someone wrote a book entitled *Children Are Wet Cement*. What do you think that title means?

Parents should realize that children learn about life and decide what is important while they are very young. Character is shaped while a child is young.

Most discipleship will happen before children reach their adolescent years. Most biblical literacy goals, character goals, and personal, social, and spiritual habits should be developed before the adolescent years.

Even before age five a child has learned the basics of how people relate to each other and what kind of behavior gets the results he wants. He knows whether or not to expect fairness and whether punishments and rewards come consistently. He knows if he is loved. He knows if his feelings matter to others. He knows if he can be forgiven when he does wrong. He has learned to either admit or hide his mistakes and sins. He has decided whether or not people in authority can be trusted to care about him and to keep their promises.

Children learn from the words and examples of their parents, even when the parents are not trying to teach them (Ephesians 5:1). The examples of adults provide children with their concept of life. Children learn what is important by seeing what is important to adults. Children learn how to treat others, how to react to situations, and how to fulfill responsibilities by observing adults. This education begins when a child is born.

Sometimes parents think that they are only teaching when they explain to a child what he should do. However, a parent is also teaching anytime he is observed by a child.

A child watches adults and learns how to react to stress. He learns how to treat strangers. He learns how to treat people who are of low status. He learns how to respond to criticism. He learns how to respond to the needs of others. Parents are always teaching even when they don't know that they are.

If the child is constantly criticized, he learns to hide his mistakes, make excuses, and blame others. As an adult he will be condemning, hypocritical, and secretive. If there is constant conflict in the home, he will become timid or aggressive. If family members ridicule him, he may withdraw from interaction with people or become a bully of others. If his parents always make him feel ashamed, he learns to live with guilt, never feeling that he is accepted by God. If he can never meet the standard of behavior that his parents demand, he will eventually rebel against it and may join a group of other rebels that become like a replacement for his family.

If people are patient with him, he learns to be patient with others. If people encourage him, he is confident to try. If he is praised, he feels valuable and is willing to give credit to others. If he sees fairness, he wants to be fair.

If a parent breaks rules but makes his child obey, the child thinks that someday he will be old enough to break rules too. If the parent is unkind to others, the child may hope to become strong enough to be unkind to others. If the parent thinks the child's problems and needs are not important, the child thinks that someday he will be an adult that can take care of himself and disregard the needs of others.

Parents should consistently demonstrate submission to God. Their children should know that their parents obey God's Word. If a parent shows that his own will is more important than God's authority, his children will expect to live the same way. A parent should often explain to children the reasons for a decision and the factors considered. This teaches the child how to make decisions.

Children learn when parents play with them. They should learn fairness, consideration, and responsiveness to others. Games develop the child's skills. Purposes of family games include learning, personal development, and enjoyment of relationships with family members. Competition in a family game is good but should not be for the purpose of dominating others so that the winner can enjoy a feeling of superiority. A question to consider during a game is, "Is everyone enjoying the game?" If only the winner enjoys the game, a wrong purpose is being served. If people are getting angry or frustrated during a game, the game is not serving the right purpose.

Parents show the value of their child when they take time for the child's activities. Parents should help their child with school projects, make or repair toys, provide the child personal space in the home, listen to his stories and jokes, and comfort him when he is upset.

Parents should know their child's schoolteachers. They should attend any scheduled meetings with the teachers to hear about their child's school situation. Both parents should go if possible. If the father does not go, it seems that other things are more important than his child. Parents should ask teachers questions about the grades and about things that happen at school. Teachers are more likely to do their best for a child and protect the child from mistreatment if they know the parents are interested.

The people who live together as a family know each other very well. They learn the needs and faults of each other. They can love each other and demonstrate that love more than they can love anyone else in the world. If they do not love each other, they can hurt each other more than anyone else can. Some people treat their family members worse than they treat strangers. A Christian home should be a place where patience, forgiveness, care, and kindness are shown.

## CHILD LABOR

A young child needs time for play and leisure every day. A child needs time to relax, use his imagination, read books, play at making something or building something, and enjoy natural environments. In a setting where families work together daily raising food or doing other tasks, it can be good for children to share in the family's work, but the parents should remember some other values also.

Long hours of work are difficult for a child not just because of physical demands, but because the work given to a child is usually repetitious and monotonous. He wishes for time for activities that use his imagination. It is sad if a child must work so much that his only leisure time is spent eating and sleeping so he can work again.

Some families struggle economically and think that they need income from their children's work. However, if they fail to have their children educated, the situation of their family may never

change. If a child works instead of going to school, he will probably spend his life working for low wages. Most careers and business opportunities will not be accessible to him.

Some people provide an education for their own children but are willing to take wrong advantage of children from poor families by employing them for long hours in fields or in household work or in street vending, knowing they are not being educated. Christians should work together to find better solutions for the families of their community.

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**"When a person no longer has sympathy for the young, his usefulness on the earth is about over."**

**George MacDonald**

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Children can enjoy work if they have tasks that give them a sense of achievement. They can also enjoy working with their parents if the parents are encouraging. Parents should be reasonable in their expectations of what a child can do and should give constructive feedback in a positive way so that their children will be motivated to keep learning and growing.

It is good for children to have daily responsibilities to teach them to be dependable and thorough. Parents should verbally affirm character qualities that they see in their child as he works, such as initiative, diligence, carefulness, and persistence. Parents should teach their children the principles of work taught in God's Word.

It is good for children to have the opportunity to earn money that they can choose to spend. They learn the value of their work and learn how to use their money for the best benefit. A child who works to earn money may realize that he should not spend it all for candy; he wants to buy something that he can keep. Parents should train their children to think about and use money in godly ways.

It is good for children and adolescents to be introduced to varieties of work that develop their abilities. It is good if a young person has the opportunity to work with people of various skills in order to learn.

- » What child labor situations exist in your society? What should parents be doing? What should the church be doing?

## PURPOSEFUL CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parents are responsible for developing the character of their children. One Christian couple, Matt and Mary Friedeman, listed the qualities that they wanted to help their children develop. After making the list, they reviewed it and made plans for actions that would help their children develop each of these qualities. The process would not be quick. These qualities do not appear suddenly. Parents must be purposeful and consistent throughout the years of raising their children. The list below has some qualities listed by the Friedemans.<sup>40</sup> Other qualities have been added to the list.

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40 Matt Friedeman, *Discipleship in the Home*, (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Society, 2010), 31-33.



| CATEGORY                 | QUALITIES TO HAVE BY AGE 18                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Spirituality             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know they are image bearers of God with eternal worth</li> <li>• Know they are sinners in need of a Savior</li> <li>• Make a commitment to Christ</li> <li>• Have a daily devotional life</li> <li>• Practice spiritual gifts</li> <li>• Be prepared for Christian service</li> <li>• Remain sexually pure until marriage</li> </ul>     |
| Bible literacy           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand foundational Christian doctrines</li> <li>• Have memorized key scriptures (300 verses)</li> <li>• Know the stories of the Bible</li> <li>• Know the books of the Bible</li> <li>• Know the Ten Commandments and the Sermon of the Mount</li> <li>• See the Gospel themes of sin and salvation throughout the Bible</li> </ul> |
| Biblical worldview       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know how to defend their faith</li> <li>• Be able to answer the big questions of life from a Biblical perspective.</li> <li>• Understand what makes Christianity unique among the world religions and cults</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   |
| Intellect<br>(Education) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received a Christian education if possible</li> <li>• Be established in the discipline of reading or listening to podcasts or instructive videos</li> <li>• Attend college or occupational training, depending on their gifts and callings</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
| Character                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice self-control</li> <li>• Be humble—able to apologize</li> <li>• Demonstrate respect for authority</li> <li>• Speak with kindness</li> <li>• Learn to use time wisely—discipline themselves in their use of social media, entertainment, and more.</li> </ul>                                                                     |
| Money & Service          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand God's concern for the poor</li> <li>• Practice generosity and serving the poor</li> <li>• Practice tithing and saving</li> <li>• Learn how to use a financial budget</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                               |
| Relationships            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love and get along with siblings</li> <li>• Demonstrate common courtesy in social settings</li> <li>• Learn how to be a loyal friend</li> <li>• Be able to speak to adults with respect and confidence</li> </ul>                                                                                                                        |

|        |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice good hygiene</li> <li>• Exercise regularly</li> <li>• Eat whatever food is served to them</li> <li>• Choose healthy food when possible</li> </ul> |
| Skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the gifts God has given them</li> <li>• Develop their skill through the discipline of consistent practice</li> </ul>                               |

Matt Friedeman described what he and his wife did after listing these qualities.

As soon as we had the above [qualities] on a single sheet of paper, we drew a line down the middle of the sheet and asked ourselves, “Now, what do we have to do to [do our part to develop these qualities in our children]?” On the left side of the sheet of paper, we jotted down [our] parental responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

If this seems like a lot of responsibility, just remember that God has given us 16-18 years to make disciples of our children. It is important to:

1. Implement a discipleship plan.
  2. Establish family rituals, such as a daily meal and a few minutes of structured teaching/training.
  3. Make discipleship a natural part of everyday life, using the many opportunities to teach and train.
  4. Continually pray God’s Word over your children.
  5. Never give up, even when you fail.
- » Choose a few items from the chart above and describe what parents can do to purposefully achieve those goals.

## THE FACTOR OF THE HUMAN WILL

- » Sometimes a person says, “My experiences made me the kind of person I am.” A similar statement is “A person is the product of his environment.” Are these statements true?

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41 Matt Friedeman, *Discipleship in the Home*, 33.

Humans are created in the image of God. People make real choices and are not controlled by instinct or environment. Throughout scripture God calls people to choose to do right and reject evil.<sup>42</sup> God judges people for their decisions.

Our environment and experiences influence us, but they do not control us, because as humans in the image of God we make real choices. That means that a child may eventually make choices that contrast with the home and environment where he was raised. A child who came from a heathen home where a sinful life was normal may repent and live for God. A child from a Christian home may choose not to follow God.

Though people make real choices, they are not completely free. The Bible tells us that we are born with a nature that has a tendency to sin (Psalm 51:5, Psalm 58:3). Humans have a natural tendency to resist authority, choose their own direction, yield to temptation, deceive others, and be selfish (Ephesians 2:1-3). Children are not neutral, waiting to be led in any direction. Children quickly look for ways to serve their own desires even if they must lie and disobey to get what they want. In addition, we know that Satan tries to deceive them and tempt them (Ephesians 2:2, Revelation 12:9).

Parents must realize that instruction alone is not enough to cause the child to do right. There is a spiritual struggle (Galatians 5:17). Parents should pray for the Spirit of God to influence and lead the child. Parents should depend on God for wisdom and for the strength to be good spiritual examples. Parents should pray fervently that their child will repent and experience spiritual rebirth at an early age.

Even if the child is converted, the parent should not expect the child to be like a mature Christian. His attitudes and feelings will not be consistent. He may sometimes yield to temptation. As long as the child shows a desire to do right, the parent should not discourage the child by telling him he is failing to live like a Christian. Instead, the parent should commend the child's good behaviors and encourage him to pray for God's help in his struggles.

Though every human is born with a tendency toward sin, every human also has the need for God. The Holy Spirit speaks to every person and gives the desire to be in relationship with God. We know that we are assisted by God when we teach our children God's Word. The Spirit of God is like an advocate inside the child, confirming truth and giving him the desire to be in a relationship with God.

## FAMILY DEVOTIONAL TIME

Families should meet daily for a few minutes of Bible reading, discussion, and prayer. Both parents and all children in the household should attend. The father should lead, but he may ask family members to read scripture and participate in various ways.

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42 Joshua 24:14-15, Ezekiel 33:10-11, Revelation 22:17

The devotional time does not always have to follow the same pattern. This time can have a variety of formats, and can include Bible stories, stories from Christian history and missions, discussion of questions, use of memorized questions and answers to teach doctrinal truths, reading of Christian materials, songs, Bible memorization, drama, and various ways of praying.

Example of a devotional time activity: Choose a Bible story and have the members of the family act it out.

Pastors should spend some time teaching their church about family devotional time. Parents should remember that God has given them the responsibility to teach their children the Word of God (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What are some concepts from this lesson that are new to you? How do you plan to apply the truth you have learned?
- » What can the church do to strengthen families and help parents with child raising?
- » How could the people of the church work together to help with the challenge of training children to follow Christ?
- » What are some examples of daily practices families should follow?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for designing the family and giving people the great privilege of being parents.

Help us to love our children like you do. Help us to always remember that they are created to know and serve you.

Give us the love, patience, and understanding that we need to train and influence children to follow you.

Enable believers in our churches to equip families, youth, and children to be strong in faith and obedience.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Study each of the following passages. Use these passages to write three pages about what scripture teaches about the responsibility of parents:
  - Genesis 18:17-19
  - Deuteronomy 6:4-9
  - Psalm 78:1-8
  - Colossians 3:21
  - Ephesians 6:4
  - 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12
  - 2 Timothy 3:14-17
  - Matthew 18:5-6
2. Whether or not you are a parent, select five of the qualities goals listed in the table given in this lesson. Write down three practical means of helping your children reach each of the five selected qualities goals.
3. If you are a parent, write out a plan and your commitment to having daily devotions with your children. Hold yourself accountable to someone for the plan and commitment you've made.

# LESSON 13

## ISSUES OF CHILD-RAISING

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Adopt God's perspective on discipline and correction of children.
2. Commit to creating a good home environment for discipleship of children.
3. Understand a child's responsibility to God.
4. Be equipped with practical ideas for daily parenting situations.

### SUSANNA WESLEY, A PURPOSEFUL MOTHER

Susanna Wesley gave birth to 19 children, but because of the conditions of the times, nine did not live long. The 10 children she raised included John and Charles Wesley. Her son John, after he became an adult, asked her to write a description of her methods for raising children, and she sent him a letter with this description.<sup>43</sup>

The children were taught the Lord's Prayer as soon as they could speak, and they repeated it each morning and evening. The children read a chapter of scripture together daily. In those days most women were poorly educated, but Susanna insisted that all children should be taught to read. She prioritized literacy over learning to work.

Susanna said that rebellion is the root of all sin and misery. She taught her children to control their impulses and submit to authority. She said that every act of obedience should be commended even if it were not performed perfectly. Mistakes could be tolerated, but every willful disobedience should be punished.

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43 Eliza Clark, *Susanna Wesley*, (London: W. H. Allen & Co, 1886), 30-36. Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/susannawesley00clariala/page/30/>.

The family always ate meals together, and children learned to eat what was served without complaining.

## CORRECTION AND DISCIPLINE

The Bible tells us that, “folly is bound up in the heart of a child...” (Proverbs 22:15). The Psalmist says that children are born speaking lies, “...they go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3). Because this is true parents are responsible to correct their children.

Imagine offering a 3 year old the choice to either eat one piece of candy right now or to be given a bowl of candy a week from now. Even if a parent explained the options to the child, most children would choose to eat the single piece of candy immediately. This illustration shows us that *explanation* is not enough to correct a child’s misbehavior.

Explanation of right and wrong is not enough to correct a child, because

1. A child cannot understand mature reasoning (1 Corinthians 13:11).
2. A child cannot see the complete and long-term consequences of his actions.
3. A child is not mature enough to control his impulses and desires with reasoning.

Maybe it seems cruel to inflict physical pain on a child, but a loving parent does it to prevent worse harm: “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24). For example, a small child who plays near a fire may fall into it and suffer great injury because he does not understand the danger. But if his mother smacks him when he goes too near the fire, the small pain prevents the large one.

Some people have experienced physical abuse from people who did not love them. Their experience makes them hate the thought of anyone physically punishing a child. However, a parent who neglects *proper* correction causes much trouble for his child later.

» Students should read Proverbs 19:18 and Proverbs 29:17 for the group.

Correction should begin when the child is old enough to understand that he is resisting his parents. Even a very young child knows when he is refusing to cooperate.

Most correction must be accomplished while the child is young and tender (Proverbs 22:15). Just as clay hardens with time and becomes more difficult to mold into a desired form, so a child’s character becomes more difficult to form with the passing of time. If a child is persistently disobeying his parents after age 10, the parents are not succeeding in their correction, and their chances of ultimate success are becoming much lower. Physical correction becomes less and less effective as the child gets older. It is a mistake for the parent to think that correction will be easier when the child is older; it will be more difficult and eventually become impossible.

As a child becomes a young adult, he or she can no longer be physically corrected as when a child. A young man or woman needs respect even if their behavior is not mature. The parent may use other forms of correction such as limiting the child's entertainment or phone time or social activities, but loving and careful communication will be the most important. The parent must realize that the young person is making real decisions, and although the parent has influence, he cannot prevent the young person from exerting a personal will and experiencing consequences of decisions.

Some parents are not sure how severe they should be when giving physical punishment to a child. If a child is still acting angry and rebellious after the correction, the punishment was not severe enough (this principle does not apply in the case of a child who is too old to be effectively corrected with physical punishment). The correction should be severe enough to make the child regret his disobedience and choose to submit to authority. Correction should not cause injury. Correction that causes bruises or marks on the skin that remain more than a few minutes may be too severe.

The Bible uses the illustration of physical punishment to explain the way God deals with his children.

» Students should read Proverbs 3:11-12 and Hebrews 12:5-8 for the group.

These scripture passages tell us that God disciplines his children because he loves them. Likewise, a father disciplines his son because he loves him. Proper discipline is a sign of love. A lack of discipline is a lack of love.

Physical correction teaches the child self-control because he learns to resist a temptation, knowing that he will be punished if he does wrong. As he resists temptation to do wrong, he develops stronger character. When he is mature, he will resist temptation because he understands the consequences and not because of physical punishment. However, a child who is not consistently corrected becomes an adult who is too weak to resist temptation even when he knows that it is bad for him.

Imagine a parent who gives his child only candy to eat because the child wants it. He does not want to make the child unhappy, but he is doing harm to the child. Likewise, a parent who always yields to the child's behavior is doing harm to the child's character and future conditions. The Bible even says that a parent hates his child if he does not correct him (Proverbs 13:24).

A child who lives in a home without boundaries is not happy. Boundaries bring security. If a child learns that he gets what he wants by arguing and fussing, he will do it all the time, but he will not be happy. Children are happy when they are secure and directed within limits, not feeling that they must fight and resist control to have anything. An undisciplined child is rarely happy.



When the child is an adult, the world will not give him whatever he wants. He will not be respected and promoted if he is rude, selfish, and irresponsible. A parent should raise his child in a way that prepares him for life. Parents must remember that they are not raising children; they are raising adults.

A parent should explain and demonstrate that his correction of his child is for the purpose of helping the child develop into a person of good character who can be trusted and respected.

- » Students should read Proverbs 22:15, Proverbs 23:13-14, and Proverbs 29:15 for the group.

Remember that the purpose of correction is to develop the child. When the child understands the wrong he has done and is already sorry, physical correction may not be necessary. The purpose is correction, not justice; the parent does not need to make sure the child receives the punishment he deserves.

- » How is the correction of a parent different from the actions of a person who bullies and threatens physical harm to make people do what he wants?

A violent person is willing to harm other people to get what he wants. A parent loves his child. Physical correction is for the benefit of the child. A loving parent does not want to harm the child. A person cannot feel that a bully or oppressor loves him, but a child can know that he is loved even when he is corrected. He can realize that his life is better because of his parents' authority.

Some parents punish severely and inconsistently because anger or cruelty. They injure their child physically and emotionally. They punish their children as a way to relieve their own stress and frustration with life. This is a serious problem that should not be tolerated by others who observe it. Friends, neighbors, and relatives should confront a person who is abusing a child. The spouse of an abusive parent should seek help from relatives, friends, or a pastor. It is important to protect a child.

- » Some parents humiliate their children publicly when they do wrong. Is this a good method of correction?
- » A student should read Ephesians 6:4 for the group.

The child needs to be sure that his parents love him and that their correction is for his benefit. When a child is humiliated by his parents, he does not feel loved. He may become bitter and feel that his parents' authority is a terrible thing that he needs to escape. Parents should correct their children privately and avoid embarrassing them in the presence of other

people. Parents should instruct and correct their children with gentleness and patience.<sup>44</sup> Proverbs 16:21b tells us that “...sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.”

- » Imagine that you told your child to take care of your animals. When you come home in the evening you see that the animals were not fed. You are tired from working all day, but you must feed the animals before you rest because your child did not obey. Should you be angry? Is it wrong for a parent to be angry with his child?

The parent should remember that correction is supposed to benefit the child. When a parent is angry because he feels disrespected or because the child's disobedience causes him inconvenience, he has an anger that cannot do anything good (James 1:20). His anger is self-centered.

A parent might express the right kind of anger this way: “Son, you did not feed the animals like I told you to do. The animals were hungry, and they would have been hungry all night if I did not feed them. I had to feed them though I was tired from working all day. I'm angry because I do not want you to be the kind of person who ignores the needs of others by neglecting your responsibility. Proverbs 12:10 teaches, ‘Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.’”

Rebecca told her children not to take food or drink into the room that had new carpet on the floor. The next day she saw one of the children eating there, and she scolded him. Later one of the children walked over the carpet carrying a glass of juice and she scolded him. Over the next few days the children sometimes took drinks into that room, but Rebecca was busy and did not correct them. Then one day her son spilled Coca-Cola on the carpet. Rebecca was angry and spanked him.

- » What is wrong with Rebecca's way of correcting her children?

Rebecca's rule was that the children should not take food or drinks into the room with carpet, but then she tolerated their rule breaking until there was an accident. She punished the accident rather than the rule breaking. This teaches children that they can break rules as long as they can prevent bad consequences. This idea develops bad character because it is the basis of all rule breaking. A person breaks rules because he thinks he can get the results he wants and avoid bad results. Parents should correct disobedience rather than punishing children for having accidents.

Michael told his sons to always put away their bicycles in the evening. Each day for a week, when Michael came home, the bicycles were still outside. Then one day at work Michael lost

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44 Though 2 Timothy 2:24-25 and Galatians 6:1 were written as instruction for dealing with sin in the church, the instruction to demonstrate patience and gentleness while correcting those who are wrong applies to the context of parenting as well.

one of his tools, accidentally hurt his finger, and had a flat tire while driving home. When he got home the bicycles were still outside, and he punished his sons.

- » What is wrong with Michael's way of correcting his sons?

Many parents tolerate disobedience when they are in a good mood and punish disobedience when they are angry about situations of life. Children do not learn to obey unless parents correct them consistently.

- » Look at the following points and explain why each is important. What happens if a parent does not follow these directions?
  - Requirements should be appropriate to a child's abilities and maturity.
  - Punish only willful disobedience, not accidents.
  - Rules and requirements should be clear and understandable.
  - When a child disobeys, the parent should explain what the child should have done.
  - Never punish a child for something that was not under his control.

## PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS FROM CHILDREN

Years ago, British psychologist, Dr. R.F. Hertz, conducted a research project. He asked 100,000 children between the ages of 8 and 14 from 24 countries to make a list of rules of behavior for parents. This research does not have the authority of God's Word, but it does show us some of the needs that children feel. Here are some of the most common responses:

- Do not quarrel in front of your children.
- Don't lie to a child.
- Always answer children's questions.
- Treat all your children with equal affection.
- There must be [friendship] between parents and children.
- Treat your children's friends as welcome visitors.
- Don't blame and punish your children in the presence of their friends.
- Concentrate on your child's good points and do not overemphasize his failings.
- Be constant in your affection and your moods.

When one parent constantly criticizes the other in the presence of the children, the children may assume that they also should be able to disagree with and see the faults of the disrespected parent.<sup>45</sup> Parents should discuss their disagreements privately and try to develop policies to follow cooperatively.

Parents should not lie to a child (Colossians 3:9), even to give him reasons to cooperate or to relieve his worries. When a child realizes that his parent lies to him, he no longer feels

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45 Instructions and principles from Ephesians 4:29-32, Ephesians 5:33; 1 Peter 3:7-12 are all applicable here.

secure. Some parents are unable to comfort or direct their children when they are afraid because the children do not believe what the parents say.

- » Choose one of the points in the section above and describe the problems that result if a parent does not follow that direction.

## A CHRISTIAN'S HOME

- » When a stranger comes to your house, does he see immediately that it is a house where Christians live? How?
- » A student should read Deuteronomy 6:6-9 for the group.

The Israelites were to give their attention to shaping the future by shaping the character of children. How were they to do it? They were to have a guarded environment for training their children in biblical principles. They were to display scripture everywhere (“write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”) Not only was scripture to be literally posted in the home, but most importantly, everything at home was to be consistent with scripture.

These families would not have had the Ten Commandments on one wall and a picture of a sinful, worldly entertainer on the other wall. That would be very confusing to a child's understanding of values.

Children are influenced unconsciously by the things they see and hear every day. If a radio station is always playing in their house, they absorb some of the philosophy that underlies that music.

It is impossible for parents to shelter their children from every evil philosophy or worldly influence, but Christian parents must teach their children to evaluate everything they hear and see through the lens of God's Word. Jesus prayed, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15, 17).

Children notice whom their parents admire as heroes. They know whom their parents respect. It is inconsistent for a parent to teach his children Christian truth while he himself admires worldly and immoral people. A parent who does this communicates to his child that he would be happier for his child to be a successful entertainer than to be a faithful Christian.

Some parents think it is okay to let their child be exposed to sinful things if they explain to their child why those things are wrong. Think about this, though: if you were trying to get your child to eat the right food, you would not put a pile of candy and cake in front of him,

then try to explain why he should eat vegetables. All the details about vitamins could not overcome his natural desires which are stirred at the sight of the candy.

Some parents allow a television to be on all of the time without concern about what their children are seeing. Christians must remember that society teaches that sin is okay as long as the results are controlled. Television shows people who are living in sin without consequences, but it is not a true description of real life. Television makes the child think his parents are keeping him from enjoying life, and he waits for the time when he can do what he wants.

Many Christians live in homes with relatives who are not Christians. In those cases, the home is not an environment that is protected from wrong influences. It is important for the Christian parent to set an example of love, faithfulness, purity, and joy, while praying that the Holy Spirit will help the child choose the right direction in life.

## IMPERFECT FAMILIES

Because families are not perfect, relationships often have a history of previous mistakes and unresolved conflicts.

Even Christian parents are not perfect. They may not always be consistent in making and enforcing rules. They don't always understand their adolescent's situation – things have changed in a new generation. They don't always have enough sympathy for their child's real issues. They don't always have the best attitude and may say hurtful words.

God created the first people and designed the family. He made a man, made a wife for him, and gave them children to raise. God knows everything. God knew that parents would make mistakes, but he designed parenthood anyway. He saw that it was still the best way, with all the defects that people have. That means that there must be a way for the family to succeed. There are many benefits of the family system even when it is not perfect.

The fact that God invented parenthood is significant for children. It means that when children rebel they are deciding to reject the system that God instituted. God said, "Children, obey your parents" (Ephesians 6:1). Parents rebel against God's plan when they neglect to fulfill the responsibilities God has given them. To reject God's plan is to rebel against God.

## RESPONSIBILITY IN CHILD-RAISING

In this scene of parenthood, there are three areas of responsibility. The child has an area of responsibility. The parent has an area of responsibility. God has an area of responsibility. We've already looked at parents' responsibility in much detail in these last two lessons. Now we will consider God's involvement in children's lives and children's responsibilities.

## God's Work in the Lives of Children

1. God wants children to have a personal relationship with him through faith in Jesus. (Read Matthew 18:1-6 and Matthew 19:13-15.)
2. God is faithful to draw our children to this relationship with him. (Read John 6:44.)
3. God talks to our children through His Word. (Read 2 Timothy 3:14-15.)

## Children in Relationship with God

1. Children can be forgiven of their sins (1 John 2:12).
2. Children can know God (1 John 2:13).
3. Children can grow in relationship with God (1 Samuel 2:26).
4. Children can worship God (Matthew 21:15-16).
5. Children and young people can be used by God (Joel 2:28).

In scripture there are various examples of children and young people being used by God to accomplish his purposes: Samuel, the servant girl of Naaman's wife, the boy whose lunch Jesus used to feed the multitude, Daniel, Joseph, David, and Mary, just to name a few.

## The Responsibility of the Child

The child's responsibility, according to God's Word, is to obey his parents (Ephesians 6:1-3). What if the parent is wrong sometimes? The child must fulfill his responsibility and not make his responsibility conditional on how the parent performs. A child is not responsible for his parent's behavior. The child is responsible to obey.

If the child could decide to obey only when he thinks the parent is right, the parent would have no authority. That can't be what God intended, because that would destroy the whole system of parenting.

The child is not responsible for how the parent uses authority. His own area of responsibility is to obey. What if the parent tells the child to do something that is wrong, like to bring him a beer from the refrigerator? The child does not have the responsibility of deciding whether the parent is right or not. He can voice his opinion respectfully, but he must obey.<sup>46</sup>

The problems that children have with their parents are not usually because they are questioning whether a command is consistent with Christian principles. The rebellious child is usually resisting his parents on routine matters, such as cleaning his room, doing household chores, being home at a certain time, and restrictions on his entertainment.

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46 If a child is a victim of physical or sexual abuse from a parent or anyone else, someone should intervene to protect the child. A child usually does not know how to find help in that situation.

The rebelling child is resisting the concept of parental authority by claiming the right to decide when his parent's commands are wrong. His resistance comes from the basic desire for independence, self-sovereignty, and personal autonomy. At what age does a person get that? Never.

Such a concept of independence is an illusion. You will always have responsibilities that come from considering other people. There will always be tasks that you know that you should do, even if your mother is not there to tell you. A person who insists on living without any commitments to other people leaves a trail of pain and destruction, hurting anyone who trusts him and depends on him.

Sometimes children are offended at their parents' concerns, feeling that the parents should trust them more. If a child can try to understand and respect the parents' concerns, the parent may trust the child more and be willing to adjust restrictions. When a child rejects parents' concerns, the parents feel that they need to restrict him more.

## ADMISSION OF MISTAKES

Many people are afraid to admit a mistake in a relationship because they fear that the admission will weaken them in future conflicts. In reality, the position of being honest and ready to do what is right is the strongest position to be in. The only way to get into that position and stay in it is to admit the wrongs that you have done, begin doing what is right, and be willing to be corrected whenever you have been at fault.

Sometimes the person in authority wants subordinates to admit their mistakes but is unwilling to admit his own mistakes because he thinks it will lessen his authority. That is wrong. If a person in authority cannot admit mistakes, his subordinates do not trust him. This principle applies to every position of authority, including that of parents.

Parents, if you are in conflict with your child, you have probably made some mistakes that need to be acknowledged. The child may be justifying his wrongdoing by your mistakes. Apologize for your harsh words, rash responses, and failure to understand a situation. There probably can be no progress toward ending conflict until you do this, for, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6b).

Whether you are the parent or the child, you need to acknowledge your wrongs. Repentance, apology, and consistent submission to God-given authority will usually gain better cooperation from others, but that is not the reason you should do it. You should do it to please God.

When you admit the wrongs you have done, you don't need to try to make sure the other person gets blamed for his wrongs. Don't use the other person's faults to excuse your wrong actions.

The relationship may improve immediately, or it may take time. Sometimes people have to see that a change is real before they change too. But the reason for you to do what is right is not to get someone else to change. You need to do what God wants you to do. Maybe the other person will not change, but you will have a clear conscience and God's blessing because you are fulfilling your responsibility. Trust God to fulfill his responsibility.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EVERY AREA OF LIFE BEING SUBMITTED TO GOD'S AUTHORITY

Imagine a small island country called Zhivia. A nearby island country called Grekia wants to conquer Zhivia. The ruler of Grekia promises the government of Zhivia that the two countries can have peace if Zhivia will give Grekia just 10 acres in the middle of their island. Would that be a good solution for peace? If Zhivia gives the enemy an area in the middle of their territory, the enemy can spread from that area to conquer more.

Imagine your life as a territory with various regions. One region may be employment or school. Another region is your entertainment. Another area is your relationship with family members. There are many other areas.

The whole territory, with all regions of your life, should be under God's authority. What happens if one region, the relationship with family members, is not under God's authority? You have allowed Satan to come into that region. From that region he will begin to invade other regions of your life. Likewise, if a person is impure in his entertainment, other regions of his life will be invaded by Satan. A Christian must put every region of his life under God's authority.

## SOME QUICK POINTS FOR PARENTS

- » Students should read Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 13:11, and Colossians 3:8 for the group.

If your child is emotional, expressing anger or frustration, he thinks you don't understand him. He probably thinks you don't care enough to listen and try to understand.

Try to listen and understand. If you are frequently dismissing his problems as trivial or ridiculous, you do not understand what he is really facing. If it seems like a big problem to him, then it is a challenge to his faith and character. If you don't understand why he is reacting so strongly, you don't understand the significance wrapped up in the situation.

Don't ever give up on your child, and don't make statements that sound like you have given up.

Don't think that all of your children are alike.



- » A student should read Ephesians 4:30-32 for the group.

When problems come up, don't review a history of failures. The child wants to think of his past failures as irrelevant to the present. He thinks he is different now and that it is unfair for you to remind him of his past mistakes. However, don't expect him to be that generous with you.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What are some concepts from this lesson that are new to you? Would you share some things that you plan to change in your practice?
- » Discuss further ways that the church families could work together to improve life at home and help the children of the church.

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We want our homes to be places of love, safety, and blessing. Help us to be pure and loving in all that we do there.

Help us to be consistent in Christian teaching and behavior. Give our children the desire to follow you.

Thank you for being faithful to each of our children. We know that your Spirit is working in their hearts.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Compile a list of seven biblical directions for families. Then list specific applications for real life situations. Write a paragraph explaining each application (seven paragraphs).
2. Choose one of the topics below. Go through the book of Proverbs and create a list of Proverbs that address this topic. Write two paragraphs summarizing what Proverbs says about the topic. Then write three paragraphs about how a parent could teach his child or adolescent the principles. Topics:
  - Telling the truth
  - Finances
  - The differences in the values of wisdom and money
  - Trustworthiness
  - Sexual purity
  - Humility
  - Receiving instruction and correction
  - Being diligent/taking initiative
  - What God says about pleasure
  - Speech
  - Relationships with others
  - Generosity



# LESSON 14

## PARENTING THROUGH ADOLESCENCE

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand God's priorities for adolescence.
2. Take responsibility for influencing and training adolescents in preparation for their adulthood.
3. Be motivated to cultivate healthy, fruitful relationships with adolescents.
4. Be equipped to follow scriptural principles while facing the challenges of adolescence.

### MARTHA – A TRAINER AT HOME

Each evening, Martha took time for prayer and Scripture reading with her two children. She would read some verses of Scripture, pausing at the end of each verse to talk about applications to life. When her children became adolescents, Martha gave them turns reading and explaining the Scripture passages. They explained Scripture well because they had learned from the example of their mother. They were able to put in their own words the principles of life that they had learned from her.

### THE PERIOD OF ADOLESCENCE

Each society has a name for the period of life between childhood and adulthood. It is the period when a young person begins to have adult interests, such as sexuality, but is not yet able to take adult responsibility. In some countries, a person is legally an adult at age 18.

In those countries, someone younger than 18 years old cannot marry, serve in the military, or make legal contracts without a parent's permission.

The age of adolescence is not exactly the same everywhere. In some societies, a person may be ready to live as an adult earlier than age 18, when he or she has learned to do the work that adults do. In other societies, a person may continue to depend on parents for several years after age 18, while still completing education.

- » What is the term used in your society to describe young people in the stage between childhood and adulthood?
- » What is an adult?

One definition of *adult* that is used for both people and animals is this: a creature that has grown to physical maturity. However, human adulthood means more than physical maturity. A young person may have the size and strength of an adult yet not be ready to take adult responsibilities.

- » What characteristics do adults have besides physical maturity?

In general, an adult is a person who is able to be self-directing and to take responsibility for decisions. This definition is not exactly precise because levels of personal responsibility vary greatly. Every person who is not totally isolated is influenced by other people, and even adults are not totally free in every decision. However, adulthood is generally characterized by making and being responsible for one's own decisions. By the end of the adolescent period, the person should be ready to make decisions for himself. The goal of parents is to prepare the adolescent for that responsibility.

Jesus told the story of a son who demanded his inheritance from his father, who was still alive (Luke 15:11-32). The son took the money and wasted it recklessly. This is an example of a person who finished the adolescent stage and became an adult but was not ready to make wise decisions. There are many young adults who are experiencing the disasters of wrong decisions they have made because they did not develop well before they received the freedom and responsibility of adulthood.

God's Word has much wisdom for adolescence, an important period of time within human development.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

- » A student should read Luke 2:40, 52 for the group.

Jesus entered adolescence and grew mentally and physically. Between these two verses is the account of Jesus visiting the Temple to talk with the teachers. Not only was he growing

physically, but he also felt able to be more independent. He was also ready to share ideas with others beyond his family and friends.

Mary and Joseph were amazed at Jesus' conversation with the teachers, but then Mary told Jesus that she and Joseph had been worried for three days (Luke 2:46-48). Jesus said they should not have worried, because he was starting his Father's work (Luke 2:49). As an adolescent he felt the normal desire to begin following the passion of his life. However, he returned home and submitted to his parents' authority for the remaining years of his adolescence (Luke 2:51).

During early adolescence, a child's body changes to be more like an adult. The child may grow rapidly in height. Hair begins to grow in several places on the body. The voice may become deeper. A father or mother should make sure their child understands that the changes are normal. God planned the normal physical and mental development of humans.

Having a good relationship with your child will help them feel able to have open conversations with you during this part of life. A child who does not feel comfortable talking with a parent about these things may have secret fears and may look for information from friends or online.

## EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is not just a continuation of the child's life like it was before. Parents are wrong to think they can continue to direct and teach the adolescent the same as they would a younger child. The adolescent's mind and interests are changing. He feels a desire for adult freedom, success, and respect. Adolescents become frustrated if they are treated like younger children.

Throughout scripture there are examples of young people making wise decisions, as did Jesus, or poor decisions, as we read in the story told by Jesus (Luke 15:11-32). Parents need to understand how their son or daughter is developing emotionally. A parent's goal is to help the young person develop self-control in all areas, including emotions, so that a father or mother's control is no longer needed.

» Read Ephesians 6:1-4. What specific directions do we get from this passage?

Children are supposed to obey both parents, which implies that a father and mother should cooperate. The passage strongly connects obedience to parents with the obligation to obey God. Parents who do not teach their children to obey are not preparing them to obey God. Allowing children to rebel against you as parents prepares them to rebel against God.

This scripture gives special direction to fathers. Fathers should discipline in a way that does not frustrate or discourage the children from doing what is right. Punishment and

correction are necessary, and they do not make the child happy immediately, but the father should be consistent and loving. That means the father should understand something about the emotional development of the child.

The father should not only give correction, but also spiritual nurture and teaching from the Lord. We do not develop our children only by attacking their faults. We must try to understand and encourage our children. We use God's truth and not only our own requirements. We demonstrate that we also are living in obedience to God.

When a child has learned to honor and obey during their childhood years, the training of an adolescent is much easier! The relationship parents established when the children were young will help during physical, emotional, and spiritual changes the adolescent experiences. There are no directions for making parenting easy, but establishing a good relationship early makes communication possible throughout adolescence.

Parents wish their children would listen, but often a father or mother must listen first. Please, for your sake and theirs - put down your phone, book, work, or anything else you are doing and give them your attention when they need to talk. Listen to them like nothing else matters. Listen without correcting their errors until you really understand what they want to say. They need to feel that you truly value them and their perspectives, and that you respect them as people. Even if they don't like your advice, they will respect it more after they know you have truly listened.

It may feel difficult to listen when a young person is expressing frustration, anger, or withdrawal. Remember that the young person does not fully understand his own feelings. Sometimes young people say what they say because their emotions are affected by their circumstances, relationships, and bodies. All of these things can affect adolescents' emotions: stress from school, pressure to be accepted by friends, worry about physical changes, resentment at not feeling valued or respected, what their hormones are doing, and their tiredness from inconsistent sleep habits.

## SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

- » Read Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:1, 13. How would you explain the commands of these verses to a young person?

The world may excuse careless and immoral behavior in young people, but these verses tell the young person to remember they are accountable to God for their actions. He is their judge.

Teaching God's Word during the various activities of life is still very important at this stage of life (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). However, it is more difficult, because adolescents become busy with many activities outside of the family group. They have their own interests, educational

activities, sports activities, and groups of friends. Their parents cannot be with them all the time, but God is, and parents should be faithful in praying for them. Fathers and mothers should seek wisdom from God in making time for special conversations. It is so important for parents to stay involved and aware of the various aspects of their young person's life.

- » Read 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 together. What responsibility has God given fathers in their relationships with their growing children?

Parents, do not assume that everything is okay just because problems are not obvious. Expect your son or daughter to face temptations and experience weaknesses, because they will! Provide them with accountability for their finances, how they spend their time, the life choices they are making, and their sexual purity. Ask for wisdom and advice from others. Listen to teachers and others who express concerns. Even if you do not agree with someone else's opinion of your child, you should listen and try to understand your child's needs.

Pray for your adolescents, and tell them you are praying for them. Let them hear you praying for them. Share with them specific prayers that you are praying. For example, you could say, "I am praying that you will hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6); and that you will thirst after God as deer pants for water (Psalm 42:1). I am asking God to fill you with His Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) so that you will love him with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor [or sibling] as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39)."

- » What are other passages of scripture that you can pray over your adolescent?

Last, on this spiritual journey with your adolescents, use the Word of God with them:

- Be an example: Regularly spend personal time studying your Bible. Talk to your son or daughter about what God is teaching you and how you are applying God's Word in your life. Even if they do not have an enthusiastic response or do not continue the conversation, they are listening and are being impacted by the Word!
- Memorize passages of scripture together as a family and recite the verses at a daily mealtime or at the end of the day.
- Read and talk through the book of Proverbs together one verse at a time. Proverbs is a wonderful book for short devotional times, with practical wisdom for everyday life. It provides opportunities for plenty of conversations and makes a huge impact.
- Instructions, principles, and examples throughout scripture are applicable to all seasons of life, so study all of God's Word with your sons and daughters.



## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Luke 2:52, the verse that describes Jesus' development as an adolescent, says that he also grew in his relationships with others. God is very interested in our relationships. He designed us to have human interaction and fellowship.

Besides family members, we are influenced by classmates, neighbors, church groups, employers, teachers and other leaders, and media. Peers are usually the most influential, for good or bad. Christian parents should monitor the social interactions of their children and young people.

As your young person progresses toward adulthood, carefully and prayerfully consider how much they can handle. On your family's computers and cellular devices, use passwords and specific apps that can protect your family from accessing evil content. Set time limits for use of devices. Monitor websites, movies, TV programs, and social media platforms. Just as you would not allow your adolescent to spend time with certain people in your neighborhood, do not allow them to follow or connect with the wrong people on their electronic device.

- » It is not enough to just protect your young people. In adolescence, you are also preparing your son or daughter to take responsibility for making their own wise decisions that honor God and protect their souls. What are some ways you can teach your adolescent responsibility and accountability in their use of technology and in their social world?

Young people tend to form groups of friends who spend much time together. They learn to share interests, such as enjoyment of the same kinds of entertainment. They begin to share the same attitudes toward the church, their parents, school, and other institutions. Parents are often surprised at the changes in their adolescent's attitudes. Young people sometimes have unexpected comments and criticisms and use vocabulary that they learned from friends. The group of friends becomes an alternative family that gives its members acceptance. A young person is strongly attracted to an alternative family if his own family does not give him a sense of value, identity, and acceptance.

A parent finds it very difficult to take an adolescent out of a friend group or to limit the group's influence. When the parent criticizes the group or individuals, the child wants to defend them and feels that the parent does not understand. A father or mother can help the adolescent by showing care, interest, and love. When a parent is meeting the young person's emotional needs, they do not depend on a friend group to be an alternative family.

- » How can parents of several families work together to help their adolescents?
- » How can your church support parents of adolescents as they help their young people to have healthy, social lives that honor God?

## THE DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSITION TO ADULthood

A child does not become an adult at a single point in time. A child passes through a transition time that lasts several years.

Of all of scripture, the book of Proverbs was particularly written for young people. In Proverbs, King Solomon addressed his son, who was learning about life and developing a worldview. Solomon talked with his son about every area of life, about the rewards of choosing God's ways and about the dangers of rejecting God's ways.

The beliefs formed during childhood and in the adolescent years, and the choices made during that time are very important for a person's life. As we consider several of the challenges of transition to adulthood, we will think about how God's Word can help us to navigate the adolescent years with our young people.

**Challenge 1:** The adolescent evaluates all he has been taught and decides what he will believe.

An adolescent wants his beliefs to be clear in his own mind, so he evaluates and questions what he has been taught. There is a possibility that he will not accept everything his parents taught him. Parents fear that risk. If they feel unable to help him understand the issues he is considering, they may begin to treat him like a child again, demanding that he accept their beliefs without question. This makes the adolescent feel that they are not letting him think for himself.

The parent should patiently explain the reasons for beliefs and give the adolescent opportunities to talk with other people who can help to explain.

» Read Proverbs 23:22-23 together.

In these verses, God says that a young person should choose to listen to the wisdom of his parents. A father or mother cannot make this choice for their adolescent, but they can cultivate a good relationship. If parents keep in open and respectful communication with their son or daughter, it will encourage their adolescents to make this choice.

**Challenge 2:** The adolescent begins to take on responsibility for making decisions.

An adolescent is beginning to understand how decisions are made, and he feels capable of making decisions for himself, but his parents and others limit his choices. He is tempted to rebel against their authority because he thinks they do not realize his capability. If he does rebel, parents naturally tend to respond by limiting him more.

Parents should lay a good foundation for this stage of their children's lives when they are much younger. They can show their children that what they require of them is for the

children's own good, just as God's discipline is for our good (Hebrews 12:9-10). Parents can demonstrate that they are not merely making rules that will bring convenience to themselves as parents.

Secondly, parents can gradually give their children responsibility for larger and more important decisions throughout their childhood and adolescent years. This enables the young people to practice responsibility, prove their trustworthiness, and prepare for adulthood.

Parents are still responsible to God to set limits for their adolescents (1 Timothy 3:4), but the adolescent years are ones of preparation for adulthood, when the young person will become fully responsible to God for his or her choices. Parents should prepare their adolescents for this next season. Proverbs is written by a father pleading with his son to make wise decisions. Solomon knew that as a parent he could not make choices for his son, but that he could make the right choices appear most attractive.

**Challenge 3:** The adolescent doesn't have the maturity of an adult.

Adolescents may not understand the dangers and risks that concern their parents. Adolescents usually feel that they can accomplish their goals and avoid the dangers. They often feel frustrated that their parents don't have confidence in their abilities and discernment.

Proverbs shows us that it is important for parents to not just tell their adolescents what is right and wrong or merely set limits for them, but to talk with their adolescents about the consequences of each choice. Listening to this instruction will help the young person to learn to think in a mature way.

» Read 1 Peter 5:5 together.

The smartest thing a young person can do is submit to the authority of his godly parents and listen to their wise advice. As 1 Peter 5:5 shows us, the young person who does this has God's special favor.

**Challenge 4:** The adolescent has the desires of an adult but does not have adult privileges.

Adults have opportunities for many privileges including marriage, property ownership, leadership positions, and the freedom to make decisions. Because adolescents cannot yet have these privileges, though they have natural desires for these things, they feel frustration. Their desires cause strong temptations. 2 Timothy 2:22 helps young people know what to do about this dilemma.

» Read 2 Timothy 2:22 together.

God has grace for young people who are willing to obey Him. He will help them to submit to their authorities and deny fulfillment of their own desires that are outside of His timing

or will. He will help Christian adolescents to turn these desires into motivation to prepare for adulthood by growing in understanding, character, and life skills.

**Challenge 5:** The adolescent sees inconsistency in others and is offended by it.

Many times, adolescents have been disappointed by many people who should have been better examples and better spiritual leaders. When this happens, adolescents are tempted to distrust everyone. For this reason, it is essential for you as church leaders and as parents to live consistent, godly lives. Inconsistencies in your life could result in young people spending eternity in hell. Though Jesus was speaking of children, not adolescents, Matthew 18:6 is certainly relevant here.

» Read Matthew 18:6 together.

The Christian young person can be an example for godliness, even if he has not seen it modeled by others. In the Old Testament, Samuel is an example of this. Samuel was raised in a priestly family that was ungodly and corrupt in many ways, yet he decided from a young age to live for God (1 Samuel 1:20; 1 Samuel 2:11-18, 22-26). Even as a child and adolescent, he lived a holy life (1 Samuel 3:19, 21).

» Read 1 Timothy 4:12 together.

**Challenge 6:** The adolescent is excitedly facing many decisions and opportunities.

Adolescents see a world full of opportunities. They may struggle to find a direction for their lives. They receive conflicting advice from various people.

They think someone should give them what they need to pursue an opportunity. It is important for adolescents to practice being faithful in the small things and to trust God to open up more opportunities for them in his perfect time.

» Read Luke 16:10 together.

It is also important for adolescents to choose to listen to godly counsel.

» Read Proverbs 11:14 together.

Young people will find that there is blessing and freedom in following the ways of God's wisdom.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » What ideas in this lesson are the most helpful to you? How will they affect you and your family, community, or church?
- » If you have been the parent of an adolescent son or daughter, what advice can you share about cultivating an open and respectful relationship with a child in this stage of life? Be honest about your mistakes.
- » What are some practical things you can do to help your young people learn to think wisely and make good decisions?
- » How do you as a parent know when to expand your child's privileges and responsibilities?
- » Summarize the main responsibilities of a parent and the main responsibilities of the child during adolescence.
- » What are some areas of life in which a father should motivate, caution, and guide his children as they grow older?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for trusting us with the responsibility of raising children to mature adulthood. This responsibility is complicated in many ways, and we must have understanding from you.

In your Word, we have seen our responsibility for teaching our children wisdom, self-control, and obedience to you. We are sorry for the times that we have failed to focus on these priorities in our relationships with our adolescents.

As we read and obey your Word, give us specific wisdom for the needs of our children. It is our greatest desire that they will loyally follow you all the days of their lives.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Find at least three scripture verses or passages that you can use to pray for the adolescents in your family or under your influence. Look for scripture passages that relate to

- Their spiritual needs
- Their character development
- Things and people that influence them
- Ways that they need to grow and develop

Write these verses where you can see them frequently. Begin to use these scriptures to pray for your young people every day.

2. Choose two of the group discussion questions from the end of the lesson. Write at least one paragraph in response to each.
3. Choose a passage of scripture to read:

- Proverbs 4-5
- Proverbs 6
- Proverbs 23
- Proverbs 24

As you read, consider the following questions. From this passage...

- What priorities should the parent of an adolescent have?
- What priorities should an adolescent have?
- What attitudes should the parent of an adolescent have?
- What attitudes should an adolescent have?
- What should the parent of an adolescent do?
- What should an adolescent do?
- What areas of life should a parent and adolescent be talking about?

Write a list of statements summarizing the passage's messages to the parent of an adolescent. Write a second list of statements summarizing the passage's messages to an adolescent child.



# LESSON 15

## THE YOUNG ADULT

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand God's perspective on important responsibilities and issues of the young adult years.
2. Be equipped to influence young adults to make wise decisions and obey God's instructions.

### EZRA, A MOTIVATED YOUNG MAN

When Ezra was a child, his parents taught him to work well. He was always happy when he had the chance to work and earn money. He was always ready to do any work that someone would hire him for. As a youth he did yard work, delivered newspapers, and repaired bicycles. Ezra was interested in being a businessman but knew that God was calling him to ministry. Ezra studied at a Bible institute. To pay his expenses at the institute he did office cleaning, restaurant work, and yard work. When he graduated, he began ministry, but sometimes painted houses or did building renovations because his ministry did not support him completely. He always tried to make ministry responsibilities and personal development his priorities rather than making profit his priority, even though he had a wife and children to support. Eventually the time came that his ministry supported him completely.

### MATURITY AND CHARACTER

- » Students should read 1 Timothy 4:12 and Lamentations 3:27 for the group.

1 Timothy was written to a young adult who was responsible for overseeing several churches. From 1 Timothy 4:12 we see that God expects believing young adults to be models in their character and behavior. They should make it a priority to be established in Christian



doctrines. They should demonstrate purity and selfless love in every interaction with others. Their behavior and speech should honor God and bring him glory.

Believing young adults should live careful, purposeful lives. They should not misuse the strength God has given them during this stage of life. They should not waste opportunities for learning, developing skills, serving others, and taking on responsibilities. The years of adolescence and early adulthood should not be spent on selfish ambitions. They are prime years for growth and service. God can enable young believers to learn self-control so that they are fruitful for him.<sup>47</sup>

## WORK

### Perspectives on Work

In some cultures, it is common to see people sitting and not working much, even though they may be young and healthy. Though they have needs and they are responsible for others, they do not have motivation to work. They say they would work if they were employed at good wages. They are not willing to work for low wages or do work that seems to be of low status. They are not willing to work to improve their environment if they will not profit personally.

Sometimes people who are hired are excited to have a job. Maybe they live in a country where a large percentage of people are not able to find good employment. They enjoy wearing the company uniform and are proud of the status of their employment. But while they enjoy their status they don't think much about how to serve the employer or serve customers. They are proud of being part of the company, but they don't realize why they were hired.

In contrast to people who refuse to work, some people are too focused on careers or on earning money. Perhaps they moved to a place where employment pays a much higher salary than their home area. They want to work and earn as much money as they can. They neglect other important parts of life, such as nurturing their relationships with God and their family.

People in a society may do these things, but believers must not simply do what is normal in their culture. Instead, they must find out what God says, and then obey him. The Bible says much about work, diligence, and productivity.<sup>48</sup>

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47 For more about this subject, see Lesson 12 of *Spiritual Formation*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.

48 For more about this subject, see Lesson 3 of *Practical Christian Living*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.

## The Origin of Work

God is creative (Psalm 104:24). God is productive (Psalm 104). God is always working, involved in individual people's lives and in the world affairs of all time (John 5:17). When God created people, he made them in his image, a reflection of himself. He wanted people to be creative and productive managers of his creation. God gave humankind dominion over every animal of earth, sea, and sky (Genesis 1:26). He made people the managers and stewards of earth's resources (Genesis 1:28-30).

Work is part of God's design for human life. From the start, God has given people great responsibility. We will each answer to him for whether we have faithfully done the work he has for us.

## Principles from Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs was written especially for young people, teaching them to think and behave wisely. Proverbs has much to say about work.

- » Students should read each scripture passage for the group.

**Proverbs 6:6-11, Proverbs 10:5.** Ants are good examples for people.

- **They work diligently even though there is no one forcing them to work.** There is no one telling them what they should do or how they should do it, yet they are productive. From the ants, we learn that we should not have to be forced to work. We should *want* to work because that is how God provides for our needs.
- **They work when it is time to work.** There are times for work, and there are times for other activities and for rest. It can be helpful to ask, "What should I be doing right now?"
- **They work while there is still an opportunity to work.** Seasons change, and the opportunity to gain resources may pass. Our opportunities also come and go. We must use the opportunity we have now, or it will be wasted.
- **They work so that they will later have the food they need.** We should not sleep or relax when it is time to work. If we are lazy when we should be busy doing good work, our future needs will not be provided. We should work *today* to meet *tomorrow's* needs.

**Proverbs 19:15, Proverbs 20:4, Proverbs 12:24.** God has set up the world in such a way that our choices have real consequences (Galatians 6:7).

If we continually choose to be lazy with our bodies, we will become physically weak. If we continually choose to be lazy in our thoughts, our capacity for learning, thinking, and reasoning will decrease.

If we refuse to work when we are able, God says we deserve to be without food. (Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

If we are diligent, God will often reward us with increased opportunities and greater responsibility.

God has set up the general consequences for our choices. We do not get to choose our consequences, but we do get to choose what we will do!

**Proverbs 14:23, Proverbs 20:6.** Some people think they are very smart, but they refuse to work. They like to dream and talk about how things ought to be done, but they themselves are not doing anything. God wants us to actually work, not just talk about it. He wants us to take responsibility and be faithful to what we have said we will do.

**Proverbs 15:19.** Sometimes people are lazy about *how* they do something. They choose an easy way, even if it will not have a good outcome. Maybe they are doing something less expensively, but what they are doing will not last over time. Maybe their method requires less effort, but the finished product will be poor quality. Maybe they are giving in to pressure from other people instead of being willing to work through challenges and do what is right.

- » What examples can you think of where people are lazy in their method of doing something?

This proverb teaches us that when we are lazy in how we do what we do, it will create problems for us and for other people later. But when we do what is right, we will be rewarded with a good outcome. We should be careful and thorough now, so that we can enjoy the best results later.

- » What examples can you think of when laziness has led to difficulty and trouble later? What examples can you think of when faithfulness and diligence have had good results?

**Proverbs 12:11, Proverbs 21:20, Proverbs 28:19.** Young adults, God has not given you the strength and health you have so that you can waste them on worthless pursuits. He has trusted you to be a good manager of your physical and mental abilities. He has given you opportunities to serve him. Being a faithful steward will require you to have self-control.

You will not be able to fulfill every desire for pleasure. You will have to focus your energy, resources, and time to fulfill God's purposes.

God expects you to provide for your own needs, the needs of your family (1 Timothy 5:8), and the needs of those who are worthy of help and have no one else to provide for them (1 Timothy 5:3-16, Ephesians 4:28, James 1:27, James 2:15-16).

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 says,

...Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

This is God's will for believers.

- » What kinds of work should believers be willing to do? Does status matter? If so, in what way or to what extent?

We will build on the topic of work by discussing finances. We have just discussed the most important reasons God wants us to work, including provision of our needs and the needs of others. Work is God's usual way of providing for essential needs—food and clothing (1 Timothy 6:8). In many places, people earn money by working, which they then spend on material provisions. In other places, people are paid with food, property, or service instead of money. Either way, God is providing for people's needs through their labor.

## FINANCES

Many scripture passages address the topic of money. How we think about and deal with money greatly affects our relationships with God and with other people. Because it is so important, God wants us to have a right understanding of money and its use.<sup>49</sup>

### Principles from Proverbs

- » Students should read each scripture passage for the group.

What is the source of our security?

1. God is ultimately the provider of the righteous (Proverbs 10:3).
2. We must not love and trust in riches, because they are limited in power and temporary in duration (Proverbs 11:4, 28).

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49 For more about this subject, see Lesson 9 of *Practical Christian Living*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.

- » What thoughts, attitudes, and actions demonstrate trust in God as a person's provider and security?

Many things are more important than being rich; for example:

1. Having good relationships with others (Proverbs 15:17).
2. Having knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 8:10-11).
3. Fearing God and being in right relationship with him (Proverbs 15:16).
4. Having honor because of good character (Proverbs 11:16).
5. Being faithful, honest, and kind (Proverbs 19:22).

- » Which of these is the most challenging to you because of your circumstances?

Principles for rightly managing money:

1. Earn money through diligent, faithful work (Proverbs 10:4).
2. Patiently collect money over time (Proverbs 13:11).
3. Honor God by giving him the first part of your increase (Proverbs 3:9-10).
4. Be generous to the poor (Proverbs 11:24-25, Proverbs 14:21, Proverbs 19:17, Proverbs 21:13).

- » Which of these do you tend to struggle with the most?

Warnings against misuse of money:

1. Never disobey God's Word for a chance to get money (Proverbs 10:2, Proverbs 15:27).
2. Do not make hasty or careless decisions (Proverbs 21:5).
3. Do not promise to pay others' debts (Proverbs 6:1-5; Proverbs 17:18).

- » Which of these principles from Proverbs are most neglected in your culture?

## CLOSE FRIENDS

- » Students should read Proverbs 13:20 and 1 Corinthians 15:33 for the group.

Close friendships are one of the strongest influences in the life of a young adult. People usually become close friends with those who share their values. But a friendship changes each person in the friendship, for better or for worse. Continuing to be close friends with someone over time *will* influence you. Your perspectives, philosophies, priorities, behavior, choices, and character will be affected. Your closest friends will influence you with their example, but also with their approval or disapproval of your choices and with their persuasive words.

» Each student should write down the names of 1-5 specific people in answer to each of these questions:

- Who do I usually look to for approval and affirmation?
- Who do I talk to about the problems in my life?
- Whose advice do I seek when I have a decision to make?
- Whose behavior is influencing mine?
- Whose philosophies do I share?

Think about the people whose names you have written down. What is their character like? What is their behavior like? What is their speech like? If you follow their example, are you following Christ? (1 Corinthians 11:1). Are they people who are marked by these characteristics:

- They fear the Lord (Deuteronomy 10:12, 20, Psalm 112:1).
- They are being shaped by God's Word (John 17:14-17).
- They make it their highest priority to please and obey the Lord in everything (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Are they influencing you towards a close, obedient walk with God? Do they tell you what is true (what aligns with God's Word), or do they tell you what is easy to hear? Do they encourage you to do what you feel like doing, or do they encourage you to do what is right in God's sight even when it is difficult?

There was once a young man who had influence. The other young people looked to him for approval of their behavior. When they said something sarcastic or crude, they glanced at him, to see if he was smiling. When they did something rebellious, they watched to see if he would wink his eye, showing his approval. They wanted to please him. But none of them stopped to consider these questions: Why do I want **his** approval? Is he a person I should be trying to please? Is his character and behavior a good pattern for me?

It takes effort to think about these issues. Believers ought to be purposeful in whom they choose as their closest friends and biggest influencers. Of course, God wants his people to influence others who are spiritually immature or who are yet unbelievers, but those people are not qualified to be our closest companions, advisors, and influencers. We should not be seeking their approval.

» A student should read Psalm 101 for the group.

This Psalm was written by King David. He feared the Lord. He committed to the Lord that he would live a life of integrity. He knew that the people he allowed to influence him would either help him to fulfill that promise or would keep him from it. Because of this, he determined to choose only faithful, godly people to be his influencers.

We are not kings as David was and usually do not have the authority or responsibility to punish evildoers as David promised to do. Yet, we must follow David's example in other ways. We must commit ourselves to living lives of integrity. We must determine that we will only choose godly people as our closest friends and greatest influencers.

## MAKING DECISIONS

Early adulthood is a time for making many decisions, some of which will have lifelong (or even **eternal**) consequences.<sup>50</sup> Following are a few of the questions we should keep in mind when considering our choices:

- **Is this action consistent with who God wants me to become?** Society tells us, “Be yourself.” “Be true to yourself.” “Follow your heart.” But we are called to be true to Christ, not to ourselves. In fact, he tells us to say “no” to our own desires when they are in conflict with obedience to him (Matthew 16:24-26). God calls us to live by his standard of righteousness. He describes the people who will be blessed, those who fear and obey him in everything (Psalm 15, Psalm 112, Matthew 5:3-11). As we faithfully follow him, we become the people God wants us to be.
- **How will this action affect my reputation?** With every choice we make, we build our own reputation (Proverbs 20:11). It is true that we should care most about what God thinks of us. But when we are known as people of integrity, we influence others for right and become believable witnesses for Christ. Proverbs 22:1 tells us that we should prioritize having a good reputation over having material wealth.
- **What consequences will follow this choice?** Proverbs 22:3 shows us that we should prepare for the future by making good choices today. When we are thinking about our options, we must consider the likely outcomes of each. How will our choice affect our own lives and the lives of others?

Proverbs 4:23 tells us that our choices and behaviors come from the motivations of our hearts. If we want to make good choices that please God, we must make sure that we are loyal to him (Deuteronomy 6:2, 5-6, Deuteronomy 13:4).

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

Young adults are responsible for personal choices, including those related to what they eat, their physical activity and exercise routines, and sleep habits. Self-control is important in all of these areas (1 Corinthians 9:27). Believers should remember that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and were redeemed by Christ's blood (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

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<sup>50</sup> For more about this subject, see Lesson 5 of *Practical Christian Living*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.

Because we are also servants of God, we should take care of our bodies and discipline ourselves to make good choices in each of these activities, so that we will be at our best for him.<sup>51</sup>

- » Students should read 1 Corinthians 6:12-13, 19-20, and 1 Corinthians 10:31 for the group.

Think about your food choices and portions in the last week. Maybe you have had an abundance of food, with many options for what you could eat. Maybe you have had little to eat, with few options. Either way, your eating and drinking should glorify God. If it were possible for Jesus to be invited to sit and eat with you, would you choose the same foods and portions you normally choose? This may seem like a silly question, but perhaps it can serve as a reminder to be thoughtful, grateful, and self-controlled while eating.

Sleep is another area in which believers must demonstrate self-control. We are not to be lazy and sleep too much (Proverbs 6:10-11, Proverbs 20:13), yet God designed our bodies to need regular and sufficient rest (Psalm 3:5). Healthy adults usually need 6-8 hours of sleep each night.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 tells us that sleep is a reward for those who work diligently. Proverbs 3:24 and Psalm 4:8 speak of sweet, peaceful sleep that God gives his children. This is the type of sleep that restores our bodies. With God's peace, we are freed from the worries and cares of the day, knowing that a faithful God is watching over us. Restful sleep invigorates the body and mind, preparing us for upcoming activities and ministry.

Proverbs 3:24 is found within a portion of the book of Proverbs that includes instructions for living a life filled with wisdom, understanding, and discretion. If you want to have sweet sleep, you must make wise choices in other areas of your life, including the amount of time you spend watching television or movies, surfing the web or using a smartphone, and spending time with friends.

Sleep can be affected by your food choices and portions throughout the day, the amount of exercise you have had, how you handled a difficult situation, or how you spent your money. Sleep can be sweet when our relationships with others have been filled with the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23.

- » Take time to read through the scriptures referenced in the section above. Evaluate your sleep by the principles found in these scriptures. Are you giving your body the rest it needs to function properly as God intended? Notice the context of the verses from Psalms: David is writing them in some very stressful situations and yet he testifies to God's faithfulness in helping to restore his body through sleep.

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51 For more about this subject, see Lesson 13 of *Practical Christian Living*, available from Shepherds Global Classroom.



## DEALING WITH STRESS

By God's design, the early adult years are filled with many responsibilities and cares that require attention and cause stress (Lamentations 3:27). A person may be trying to complete an education degree, start a business, and be working a job or several jobs. There are multiple relationships that need a young adult's intentional focus. Finances, transportation needs, and a home all need attention, but cause stress.

Stress has been defined as "the physical and emotional response to events that threaten or challenge us."<sup>52</sup> Think about how you view your circumstances. How do you mentally work through a situation that you are experiencing?

When something is in your future, how do you think about it? What emotions do you allow yourself to feel about the possibilities? What perspective influences how you will deal with that situation? What is your general temperament and personality (Proverbs 15:15)?

Your perspective, temperament, and personality all affect how you respond to life's situations and what level of stress you will experience. While stress is a normal part of life, how you handle stress is a personal matter. Anxiety sometimes causes headaches, muscle aches, sickness, high blood pressure, ulcers, and many other mental, emotional, and physical disabilities (Proverbs 12:25). A bad response to stress can greatly hinder your service to Christ. Because of this, it is not a surprise that God's Word tells us not to worry or be anxious.

- » Students should read Matthew 6:34, 1 Peter 5:7, and Psalm 105:4 for the group.

When we are faced with overwhelming circumstances, we must choose to trust and depend on God, the only one who has no limitations. He is perfect in strength, wisdom, and goodness. He cares for his children perfectly. He wants us to realize our dependency on him, to bring him every concern, and to seek his strength. As we do, he can give us peace, rest, and all that we need. While in our youth, we must learn to maintain a stillness and quietness before God and wait for him to lead (Psalm 46:10, Lamentations 3:25-27).

- » List the stressful situations you are experiencing now. What should be your response based on the Word of God?

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52 Robert S. Feldman, *Discovering the Lifespan*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012), 317.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » In this lesson, what ideas or principles were new to you? What other biblical principles have you thought of that relate to these areas of the young adult's life?
- » How will your personal life be affected by what you have studied in this lesson?
- » In your church, which of these topics most needs to be addressed among young adult believers?
- » How can you influence the Christian young adults you know to think and behave biblically in these areas of life?

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank you that your Word teaches us how to live for you in every stage of life. Thank you for preparing us to live fruitful and productive lives in our young adult years.

Help us to glorify you by being faithful stewards of the strength, resources, and opportunities you give us. Help us to be godly influences on others and to choose godly friends and advisors.

May we make wise decisions and honor you with our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Amen

## LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul instructed Timothy to be an example in specific areas. In writing, define each of these areas. Then describe how each of these can be lived out in a young adult's life. Give at least one practical example for each.
2. Choose one of the topics from this lesson:
  - Maturity and character
  - Work
  - Finances
  - Close friends
  - Making decisions
  - Physical health
  - Stress

Write at least three paragraphs about your chosen topic:

- Summarize biblical principles related to that topic.
- Explain some positive consequences that come from obedience to those principles.
- Describe some negative consequences that come when these principles are neglected.

When you are writing about the positive and negative consequences, be sure to think about the effects of a person's choices on different people: that person, their family, their community, and their church.

# APPENDIX A

## RESPECT FOR WOMEN

### JESUS' EXAMPLE OF RESPECT FOR WOMEN

Women were considered inferior to men in the first-century Roman world and in Judaism. A low view of women is still prevalent in many cultures around the world, and in many homes. Women are disrespected, used as sexual objects, and abused. But Jesus' high regard for women should serve as our example.

For Christ, women have inherent dignity and value equal to that of men. Jesus said, "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matthew 19:4, Genesis 1:27). Women are created in the image of God just as men are. Like men, they have self-awareness, personal freedom, a measure of self-determination, and personal responsibility for their actions. Females are seen by Jesus as genuine persons, not simply as the objects of male desire. He viewed them as persons for whom he had come into the world (Luke 8:1-3).

James Borland, with John Piper and Wayne Grudem, offers these clear examples of Jesus' high view of women and his respect for women as found in the four Gospels:

#### **1. Jesus regularly addressed women directly while in public.**

This was unusual for a man to do in Jesus' day (John 4:27). The disciples were amazed to see Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:7-26). He also spoke freely with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:10-11). Luke notes that Jesus spoke publicly with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12-13), the woman with the bleeding disorder (Luke 8:48, Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34), and a woman who called to him from a crowd (Luke 11:27-28). Jesus addressed a woman bent over for 18 years (Luke 13:12) and a group of women on the route to the cross (Luke 23:27-31).

#### **2. Jesus showed his respect and high regard for women by how he spoke to them.**

He spoke in a thoughtful, caring manner. Matthew, Mark and Luke record that Jesus addressed the woman with the bleeding disorder as a "daughter" and referred to the disabled woman as a "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16). By calling them "daughters of Abraham" Jesus places them on an equal spiritual status with "sons of Abraham."

### 3. Jesus shows the inherent value of women by holding them personally responsible for their sin.

This can be seen in his dealings with the woman at the well (John 4:16-18), the adulterous woman (John 8:10-11), and the sinful woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:44-50). Their sin was not ignored but confronted. His action showed each woman had personal freedom, was responsible for her choices, and must personally deal with the issues of sin, repentance, and forgiveness.

## HOW JESUS' VALUE OF WOMEN SHOULD GUIDE THE CHURCH TODAY

The ideal biblical role of women in ministry and in the home is being discussed in many churches and denominations today, as it should be, yet the value and equality of women as persons made in the image of God should **never** be questioned. Jesus continually showed the worth and dignity of women as persons. Jesus commissioned women as the first heralds of his resurrection (John 20:17). He valued their fellowship, prayers, Christian service, financial support, testimony and witness. Jesus honored women, taught women, and ministered to women in thoughtful ways.

## RESPECT FOR WOMEN SHOWN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus' example of respect for women is seen in the life of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on both sons and daughters, and menservants and maidservants (Acts 2:17-18). The Holy Spirit showed no partiality.

In Romans 16, Paul commends a woman named Phoebe as a servant of the church (verse 1), both Priscilla and Aquila as his fellow workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for his life (verses 3-4), Mary as one who worked hard (verse 6), Junia as one well known to the apostles (verse 7), and other women also.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul commends the God-designed tenderness and maternal love of women when he writes, "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7). In Ephesians he commands husbands to love their wives, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," and as their own bodies (Ephesians 5:25, 28). Peter appeals to husbands to, "live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman" (1 Peter 3:7).

Clearly, women were considered valuable in the early church, and men were taught to be respectful of women. It's time for spiritual leaders everywhere to stand up for women and to stand against their mistreatment in every culture. It's time for us to treasure women as persons uniquely designed by their Creator in his image. Any teaching of male and female

role distinctions in the church or home must begin with this foundation, or our teaching becomes a pathway for abuse.

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- » Describe the distinctions between men and women that are practiced in your culture. How would those distinctions be reformed by careful application of biblical truth?
- » How do churches in your country treat women differently from men? Is there a difference between churches and the culture?
- » Based on the example of Jesus, what customs should change?



## APPENDIX B

# BIRTH CONTROL

### METHODS OF PREVENTING PREGNANCY

Medical science has developed ways to prevent pregnancy for people who want to have sexual activity but do not want children. The term used for methods of preventing pregnancy is *contraception*. There are several methods of contraception:

1. Pills that prevent the woman's body from producing an egg to be fertilized
2. Pills that cause the egg to die after fertilization
3. Physical devices that block sperm from entering the woman

There is a period of a few days each month when a woman is fertile. A couple may learn the schedule of the woman's body so that they can avoid sexual activity during the time when the woman could become pregnant. This fourth method of preventing pregnancy is not considered contraception.

### REASONS PEOPLE USE CONTRACEPTIVES

Some organizations recommend the use of condoms to reduce the spread of disease and prevent pregnancy among people who do not limit their sexual activity to a spouse. Use of contraceptives outside of marriage is not discussed here. The Bible condemns sexual activity outside of marriage. Evangelical Christians believe that the right way to avoid disease and prevent pregnancy outside of marriage is to reserve sexual activity for marriage.

There are several reasons some married couples use contraceptives:

- Medical professionals in many places urge the use of contraceptives for poor families who struggle to support many children, so that fewer children will be born.
- Sometimes a couple wants to wait for a while after they marry before having children because they need to save money or improve their living condition in some way.
- A couple may use contraceptives to lengthen the time between the births of children.
- Sometimes a couple uses contraceptives because they feel that they have the number of children that they want and do not want more.



- Sometimes a woman has health problems, and a doctor advises her to use contraceptives because pregnancy would be dangerous for her and the child.

## THE DEBATE AMONG CHURCHES REGARDING CONTRACEPTIVES

The Bible does not speak specifically about whether or not it is right to try to prevent pregnancy. The Roman Catholic Church condemns the use of contraceptives but allows the scheduling method of avoiding pregnancy. Some leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church oppose prevention of pregnancy, but not all. Among Protestant and evangelical churches, there is a variety of doctrine.

The following points are used by some churches as reasons to forbid contraceptives. After each is a discussion giving additional perspective.

### 1. Children are a blessing from God and a purpose of marriage.

The lesson about childlessness describes God's blessing of children. Some churches believe that God's value of children is a reason to forbid contraceptives. Other believers would say that if they have children, it is not wrong to prevent additional pregnancies, especially if there are health concerns or economic challenges.

### 2. Contraceptives are used to protect immoral sexual activity from its consequences.

The fact that they can be used for immoral purposes is really not relevant to the issue of their use by married couples.

### 3. Contraceptives make sexual activity selfish and impure by removing the legitimate purpose of sex, which is to conceive children.

While it is true that sexual activity can be selfish or impure, it is a part of the marriage relationship, not just for the purpose of conceiving children (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). The Bible tells us that husbands and wives are to serve one another in this way.

### 4. Contraceptives make pregnancy a human choice instead of God's choice.

Some churches believe that a couple should trust God to give them the children they should have, without trying to control the time or the number of children. Other Christians would say that we are responsible to make decisions about all of the aspects of our lives, and we can make decisions about avoiding pregnancy if we are trying to follow Biblical priorities.

## A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

Because (1) the Bible does not make a definite statement about contraceptives and (2) evangelical believers have a variety of opinions on this issue, believers should respect the decisions of other believers. A couple should make sure they are submitted to God and following biblical priorities, then pray for wisdom from God as they make this decision.

When pregnancy happens, there is no decision to make regarding whether or not to have a child. Scripture is definite that it is wrong to end the life of an unborn child. Because human life begins at conception, the pills that prevent the egg from living after fertilization are wrong. A couple that chooses to use contraceptives should make sure they are using something that prevents pregnancy and not something that causes the death of the fertilized egg.

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# RECORD OF ASSIGNMENTS

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Initial when each assignment has been completed. All assignments must be successfully completed to receive a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom.

| LESSON | ASSIGNMENT 1 | ASSIGNMENT 2 | ASSIGNMENT 3 | ASSIGNMENT 4 |
|--------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1      |              |              |              |              |
| 2      |              |              |              |              |
| 3      |              |              |              |              |
| 4      |              |              |              |              |
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| 15     |              |              |              |              |

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