Marriage – How to Build it to Last

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Brief summary:

God designed marriage as a sacred covenant between husband, wife, and God. Yet even committed couples can lose connection as life and ministry change around them. This session offers four practical, grace-filled rhythms for strengthening our own marriages and helping couples in our churches build relationships that last.

Welcome

- Introduce the topic
- Current situation in EU (crude stats)
    - 1.7 million marriages annually
    - .7 million divorces annually
    - 41% of births are outside of marriage, over 50% in some countries
- Have people stand who have been married more than 5 yrs, 10 yrs, etc.

Ice breaker

- In their small groups: Introduce yourselves and share a couple wedding blooper stories
    - In your group, introduce yourselves and share one lighthearted wedding blooper story. Choose one story your group would be willing to share with everyone.

Transition

A joyful wedding can launch a marriage, but it cannot sustain one. Newlyweds may begin with deep love, optimism, and an idealized view of each other; lasting marriage begins when that optimism becomes deliberate, daily commitment.

Today's roadmap:

- Consider the foundations of marriage
- Four practical grace-filled practices
- Warning signs
- Responses as couples, leaders and individuals
- Discussion and application time

Marriage as a Covenant

- Marriage is not a 50/50 contract (What am I getting?) - often seen this way by the world
- Marriage is a 100/100 covenant (How can I serve?)

- God is the author and architect of marriage. It was designed to mirror Christ's relationship with the Church.
- A healthy Christian marriage isn't just about two people trying to get along; it's about two people individually pursuing God, which naturally draws them closer to each other.
- A sacred promise before God to choose daily, intentional love and commitment. Strong marriages grow when both spouses combine spiritual intention with practical habits.

God as the Foundation

- Triangle example
    - Picture a triangle with God at the top and husband and wife at the lower corners. As each spouse moves closer to God, they also move closer to one another. A healthy Christian marriage grows through both personal devotion and shared rhythms of prayer and Scripture.
- More than just individually pursuing God – pursue Him together as well; important to have rhythms of prayer and being in His Word together.
- Ecclesiastes 4:12 — *"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."*

Discussion: Block 1 questions

Four practical, grace-filled rhythms or intentional movements

> *God designed marriage as a sacred covenant between husband, wife, and God. Yet even committed couples can lose connection as life and ministry change around them. This session offers four practical, grace-filled rhythms. Building a marriage to last requires four intentional movements: choose the right posture, protect time together, make space for one another, and adjust faithfully through every season. We will finish by considering how these practices can strengthen marriage ministry in our churches.*

1. **Make the choice**
   Make the choice to start with the right posture…
    - Before God
        - Is my heart aligned with God's?
        - Am I looking to Him for my identity?
        - Ask the Lord to help you see your spouse the way He does.
    - With your spouse (Think 1 Cor 13)
        - Choose to be full of grace and humility
        - Practice forgiveness

        - Cultivate gratitude: Choose to focus on your spouse's God-given strengths rather than focusing on the flaws; express daily appreciation
        - Turning Toward Each Other: Respond to your partner's small bids for connection (a look, a sigh, a comment). View these as moments to extend fellowship.

2. **Make the time**

- Relationships take time, so we need to sure we make the time.
    - Protect connection time
        - Intentional time: Dedicate non-negotiable time each week—such as a weekly date night or a distraction-free daily debrief—to reconnect and recharge together.
        - Put it on the calendar before the week fills
    - Stay curious - Ask questions.
        - Keep learning who your spouse is becoming
        - Stay connected to your spouse's world – their current joys, struggles, and prayers.
        - Especially important to avoid miscommunication. Seek to understand rather than "win"
    - Pray, serve and dream together
        - Build a shared family culture through shared prayer, shared service, and shared values.

3. **Make space for each other**

- Life lived together
    - Look across your personal life, home life, work, and ministry. Where would **inviting your spouse in** create greater understanding, partnership, or connection?
- Room to grow individually
    - Create space for them to also be their own person **outside the marriage**. Recognize your spouse's needs and make space for them to be met
- "Both / And" are necessary
    - For friendships
    - Opportunities to serve
    - For rest, etc.

4. Navigating the seasons of marriage

- Marriage changes across seasons
- When dynamics change, things can sometimes get shaky. Or sometimes we just stop putting in the work, and things get shaky.

4 warning signs that a marriage needs attention

- The warning signs
    - Criticism attacks the person rather than addressing the concern

    - Defensiveness avoids and resists responsibility
    - Disrespect devalues the other person
    - Shutting down withdraws from conversation and the relationship
- When any of these four warning signs appear, they deserve prompt attention. Return to the foundations; work back through the steps – and **the order matters!**
    - Posture before God, grace toward your spouse, intentional time, and healthy space.

Guard the shepherd's home

As Christian workers and leaders, we know that pressure on the home can weaken both our relationships and our witness. Even as we help others strengthen their marriages, we must guard our own by noticing strain early, inviting trusted accountability, and protecting time and attention for our spouses.

- Be on your guard
- Leave your roles and titles at work
- Invite accountability

Personal Reflection Time

Importance of the church and the role it plays in marriages (from 2018 Harvard study)

- Couples actively engaged in church have a lower divorice rate, because the church…
    - Teaches fidelity and forgiveness
    - Helps provide resources to the couple – advice, mentors, tangible help, etc.
    - Provides community to encourage and support the couple

Discussion: Block 2-4 Questions

Summary: A strong marriage is a powerful witness of love, patience, and endurance.

- **Call to Action:** Commit to **one small act of service or intentional prayer** for their spouse starting tonight.

> *A strong marriage is a powerful witness of love, patience, and endurance. Before tonight ends, choose one small act of service, one sincere expression of appreciation, or one intentional prayer for your spouse—and follow through within the next 24 hours.*

Roundtable & Discussion Guide

Block 1: Redefining Covenant in a Culture of Contracts

- In your ministry experience, what are the most common signs that a couple is operating on a **"contract" (50/50) mindset** rather than a **"covenant" (100/100) mindset**?

- How can we, as church leaders, better preach and teach the reality of *covenant* to engaged couples before they walk down the aisle?

Block 2: Identifying the "Four Warning Signs" in Counseling

- Which of the four communication warning signs (**criticism, defensiveness, disrespect, or shutting down**) do you find most destructive in the couples you counsel?

- What practical, grace-filled "homework" or exercises have you found effective in helping couples break these negative communication habits?

Block 3: Cultivating Spiritual Intimacy & Shared Vision

- Many couples struggle to pray together out of intimidation or a lack of habit. What are some **low-barrier, practical ways** we can encourage couples to begin praying together?

- How does your church (or the church in general) currently help couples build a "shared vision" or family culture? Where can we improve?

Block 4: Ministry Strategy & Next Steps

- If you were to integrate some of the ideas discussed today into your church's marriage ministry, what format would work best (e.g., small groups, a weekend workshop, a sermon series)?
    - Or if you don't currently have a marriage ministry within your church, how might you consider better supporting and equipping your couples so that their marriages will be built to last?

- What is the single biggest obstacle your church faces in building a thriving marriage ministry, and how can we support one another to overcome it?

Personal Reflection: Guarding the Shepherd's Home

Pause and reflect: Where does your marriage most need attention right now—your posture, your time, the space you make for one another, or the way you are navigating your current season? Write down one next step before discussing ministry strategy.

- **The Reality Check:** Leaders can pour so much into their congregations that little energy remains for their spouses. Without excusing that pattern or condemning yourself, ask honestly: How healthy is the emotional and spiritual connection in your marriage right now, and what needs attention first?
- **Identifying the Warning Signs:** When ministry stress peaks, which communication trap do you personally fall into most easily with your spouse? (Criticism, defensiveness, disrespect, or shutting down/stonewalling?)
- **Protecting time:** Think about your weekly schedule. What is one practical boundary you need to set this week to protect your date night or your daily distraction-free connection time?
- **My Commitment:** Write down **one small, specific act of service, appreciation, or intentional prayer** you will surprise your spouse with within the next 24 hours.