

INTRO:

- For those who are in Christ, there is hope — not only for your marriage, but for every relationship you are in right now. God, who designed and created both marriage and the body of Christ, is present and actively working in your home, your friendships, your family, and your ministry. He is not surprised by anything going on in your relationships right now.
- Remember, we are all sinners in need of a Savior. All relationships involve sinners, and none of us escapes the reality of conflict on this side of glory. But there is real and lasting hope for change in every one of those relationships, and that hope is the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Now this instruction is for you first — for your heart. The grace of being able to walk with others through the hard places flows from a willingness to let God do that work in you first. It is necessary for us to do the hard work of heart work by examining our hearts, uncovering our idols, and addressing them biblically. So before we look outward, we look inward — because the same gospel that reorients a marriage reorients every relationship we are in.
- One challenge married couples face in conflict or crisis is that they forget the purpose of their marriage.

Part 1: THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

A) Marriage does not exist for itself

In his book *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, Ray Ortlund traces marriage from Genesis to Revelation, and beautifully unpacks God's design and purposes for marriage throughout Scripture. Ortlund reminds us that God intended for marriage to be a living, breathing display of the gospel.

Ephesians 5:31-32: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. **This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.***

Revelation 21:2: *"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."*

Earthly marriage prepares our hearts for our "eternal honeymoon" with the Lamb. Marriage is a picture. Christ is the groom. The church is the bride.

B) Marriage is designed to model the relational nature of God.

Genesis 2:18 says, *"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone...'"*

That tells us something important: the fundamental need of the human heart is not the gift of marriage, but the Lord Himself. Ortlund's point is that **in the beginning**, the man was alone and needed a counterpart companion.

After the fall, Scripture affirms singleness as a precious, spiritually formative calling of God for holiness and service. And as image bearers, created in God's image, we are all designed for deep, covenantal relationship.

Genesis 2:24 – *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

Matthew 19:6 (“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”), showing **that the Lord** is the active, binding Person in this union.

C) The Lord designed marriage to be complementary

The wife is called to help her husband, and the husband is called to lead his wife.

The bible says in Genesis 2:18, *“...I will make him a **helper fit for him.**”*

The word “Helper” (ezer) does not imply inferiority, as God Himself, the Holy Spirit, is called our helper in Scripture.

Rather, the woman was created to complement, match, and uniquely ally with the man so they could pursue God’s mandate together. (Gen 1:28-30).

Ephesians 5 gives us one of the clearest pictures of our roles and responsibilities in God’s design for marriage.

Ephesians 5:22-24 *“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”*

Wives are called to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. This isn’t arbitrary or cultural; this is by design. This is why it was important for me to go over the purpose of marriage in the beginning.

D) The Lord designed marriage for sexual joy

“From creation, Scripture makes it clear that God intends sexual intimacy to take place exclusively between a man and a woman who have entered into the marriage covenant together. Coming together physically is meant to be a picture of the oneness of life and relational intimacy enjoyed by a man and a woman who have committed themselves to one another for life.” -Jim Newheiser Marriage Divorce and Remarriage

Proverbs 5:18–19 *“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth... let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”*

1 Corinthians 7:3-5 *“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”*

E) Marriage is a picture of redemption in a fallen world

Though sin shattered the perfect harmony of the first couple, marriage serves as God’s instrument to uniquely display Christ’s rescuing, redeeming love and to model submission to Him.

In Ephesians 5:21–6:9 we see a community of people the Lord has called out of the world and saved for the purpose of being zealous for good works and adorning the gospel.

TABLE DISCUSSION:

If you are married: Which of these five purposes of marriage have you and your spouse struggled with most often? What desire do you think was driving that conflict?

If you are single: Which of these five purposes of marriage stood out to you most — either as something you long for, fear, or are preparing your heart for? What does that reveal about what you are desiring?

PART 2: THE ANATOMY OF MARITAL CONFLICT

Marriage is not only a picture of Christ and the church, but it is also one of God's primary means of personal sanctification. God is doing something both **IN** you and **THROUGH** you in your marriage.

A) The Fall

The fall introduced sin, suffering, and brokenness into God's perfect creation. And as we see in Genesis 3:16, the consequences of sin include a wife's temptation to control her husband, and a husband's temptation to rule with passivity or harsh domination.

Genesis 3:16, *"Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."*

It's interesting: if you look closely at Gen 3:16, God doesn't say, "Wife, you're going to have conflict with your husband because he forgot your birthday, " or "Husband, you will have conflict with your wife because she's a backseat driver. He says, "YOUR DESIRE" is what will cause conflict.

B) Conflict starts in the heart

Conflict doesn't magically happen the moment you get married. No, every woman and man, whether single or married, will struggle with conflict because marriage doesn't cause conflict; our desires do.

Conflict happens when our desires clash. If both people want the same thing at the same time, and in the same way, there is no conflict. But when the desires differ, conflict is inevitable.

James 4:1-3: *"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."*

James asks the diagnostic question: What causes fights and quarrels? He doesn't answer, "It's your spouse's or loved one's tone of voice," he doesn't say, "your financial stress." No, he says, "it's your desires and passions **WITHIN YOU**" -the things that **YOU** want but don't have, the things that **YOU** have but don't want, the things **YOU** crave. James is telling us that our conflicts start in our hearts. And God is using our circumstances that lead to conflict to expose what is already inside our hearts.

C) The mini kingdom of Self

Conflict in marriage arises when both the husband and wife are living for the "kingdom of self" rather than the kingdom of God.

Which means we have a worship problem. We are worshiping our idols rather than worshipping God and finding our complete satisfaction in the love of Christ.

For example, we may want:

- Control (wanting life and others to conform according to personal preferences)
- Comfort (avoiding difficulty or inconvenience)
- Safety (knowing what to expect and feeling secure)
- Pleasure (personal enjoyment for the sake of escape or relief).

When both spouses or friends are living for the kingdom of self, their desires, expectations, and responses will naturally be at odds. True unity and peace are found when we orient our hearts toward the kingdom of God, where love, respect, comfort, and acceptance are satisfied in Christ rather than from each other.

D) When Hearts Harden

When we neglect to work out the gospel in our marriages and fail to routinely replace our worship of self with the worship of the one true God, our hearts become callous.

Ephesians 4:31: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

When we don't address those little offenses with the gospel, those day-to-day seeds of resentment can take root in our hearts and grow into bitterness.

Eventually, we no longer respond to our spouses or loved ones in the love of Christ. Instead, we relate to them through the lens of our unmet expectations and what we believe we deserve:

- “He always forgets things; he doesn’t care about me”
- “She always nags; she has no respect for me.”

When our hearts are hardened towards our spouse or friends, every conflict feels like a crisis.

Remember the working biblical definition of crisis from Week 1 of this course? In that providential pressure, the hidden allegiances of the heart are exposed, and every false refuge feels insufficient; you are brought to a decisive point – either deeper trust in the Lord or a further running from Him. The gospel alone reorients our longings so we can see our spouse or friends as God sees them and respond in Christ-like love.

TABLE DISCUSSION:

If you are married: What do you routinely desire or expect from your spouse? How do you typically respond when your spouse doesn’t give you the comfort, control, or respect you feel you deserve? What does that reveal about what you are worshiping?

If you are single: What is one desire you are aware of that, when unmet, tends to move quickly from desire to demand in your heart? How do you typically respond when those expectations go unmet? What does that reveal about what you are worshiping?

PART 3: THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL

Because from the beginning, marriage was designed by the Lord with Christ and the church in view, the only cure for conflict is the gospel itself.

A) The gospel has rescued us from the penalty of sin.

Jesus has forgiven us so much that we can extend relentless forgiveness towards each other.

Romans 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Psalms 103:2-3 *“Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity...”*

Romans 3:22-25 *“the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift,*

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith."

Whether married or single, we all must rehearse the gospel and realize that because Christ tenderly and faithfully forgives us, we have no right to hold grudges, build walls, or harbor bitterness against our spouses or loved ones.

Ephesians 4:32 *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*

Notice the standard there. We don't forgive based on how sincere the apology is...or how quickly change happens, or whether we feel like it.

Instead, we rehearse the gospel. We remind ourselves: Christ has been patient with me. Christ has fully forgiven me freely, and repeatedly. And because that's true, then I no longer have the right to withhold forgiveness from my spouse or loved one.

We forgive each other because we have been forgiven by God, in Christ.

B) The gospel has rescued us from the power of sin.

God is after your heart, and marriage is one context God uses to transform you. Conflict is the training ground for the sanctification of your heart, and the gospel is the power that brings about change (not a changed marriage or the absence of conflict).

Ephesians 4:2 says, *"with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,"*

Colossians 3:12-13 *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."*

God calls us to relate to one another with tender grace and mercy. Why? Because this is exactly how Christ relates to His church. Because Christ remains tenderly and faithfully committed to His flawed, unfaithful Church, Christians are called to weather conflict with long-suffering, resilient grace and unconditional forgiveness.

That means we don't run and hide or attack the other person at the first sign of conflict. We don't withdraw, and we don't yell and scream when things get hard. We ask God for help to endure, to love, and bear with one another. Not because our spouse or loved ones deserve it, but because Christ has done it for us.

C) The gospel has rescued us from the presence of sin.

Life is short, The Bible says our lives are a vapor. Just like everything else in this life marriage is a temporary gift. It doesn't last forever.

"The beauty of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and His Church shines brightest when nothing but Christ can sustain it. Very soon the shadow will give way to Reality. The partial will pass into the Perfect. The foretaste will lead to the Banquet. The troubled path will end in Paradise. A hundred candle-lit evenings will come to their consummation in the marriage supper of the Lamb. And this momentary marriage will be swallowed up by Life. Christ will be all and in all. And the purpose of marriage will be complete. To that end, may God give us eyes to see what matters most in this life. May the Holy Spirit, whom He sends, make His crucified and risen Son the supreme Treasure of our lives. And may that Treasure so satisfy our souls that the root of every marriage-destroying impulse is severed. And may the marriage-watching world be captivated by the covenant-keeping love of Christ." -John Piper This Momentary Marriage - A Parable of Permanence

Small Group Questions

Whether you are married or single, there are people in your life who are experiencing relational conflict and crisis. God is not only doing a work in your own heart through this material — He is equipping you to walk alongside others. As you reflect on these questions, consider both what the Lord is exposing in you, and how the gospel truths from today might be the very things He sends you to bring to someone else.

- Where are you letting your mini-kingdom of Self hijack the Gospel story that God intends your relationships to reflect — whether in your marriage, or your friendships?
- How can you begin to replace your heart idols with the worship of the true God — loving, trusting, fearing, and delighting in Him?
- How can learning to love, trust, fear, and delight in God change the way you come alongside someone else in conflict or crisis?

Homework Assignment: The Heart of Conflict in Marriage

1. **Read:** Prayerfully read the article [*Getting to the Heart of Conflict*](#) on RW360.
2. **Reflect:** Ask yourself the “X-ray” questions listed in the article.
3. **Identify (2–3 sentences):** Write a brief response explaining two desires that God revealed to you that have come to rule your heart.
4. **Apply (4–5 sentences):** Write a short paragraph explaining how, with God’s help, you plan to replace your heart idols with the worship of the true God (loving, trusting, fearing, and delighting in Him).

DESIRE-TO-DEMAND HANDOUT

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. James 4:1-4

DESIRE → EXPECT → DEMAND → DISAPPOINT → JUDGE → PUNISH

I DESIRE: These are good, God-given desires. At their basic core, they're not sinful and that's the key in understanding idolatry. These are things like love, respect, safety, security, acceptance, a godly family, marriage, children, provide for family, etc.

I EXPECT: A slippery slope occurs where we start thinking "I want" or "I need" these desires to be met in order to be happy, fulfilled, pleased, etc., in life. Right here, we have one foot in the kingdom of Self, and one foot out.

I DEMAND: Here we say, "I must have" or "I deserve to have" my desires to be met. At this point we justify and legitimize our desires. Both feet are firmly planted in the kingdom of Self now and idolatry has taken root.

I'M DISAPPOINTED: Here all our emotional energy is expressed when we don't get something that we really, really, really, really, really want. We question God's character, love, and mercy, get angry, depressed, fearful, etc.

I JUDGE: Because idols demand a sacrifice and we're living for our own mini-kingdom, we play the judge (take God's place) and issue a verdict that needs to be carried out because our functional idol (desires) did not get satisfied.

I PUNISH: Because our idol (desires) didn't get satisfied on our terms, we attempt to hurt or punish the other person so they will give in to our demands. Punishment can take many forms: lashing out in anger and tearing down the other person, or shutting down, and isolating withholding affection or avoiding making eye contact.

Take a minute and think about what has a strong grip on you and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What am I willing to sin to get?
2. What am I willing to sin in order to keep?
3. What do I run to as a refuge or for comfort or peace apart from God?
4. Where or on what do I spend all my time and money?
5. Where is there disorder in my life and where am I discontent with my circumstances?