

MARRIAGE UNVEILED



Marriage Unveiled
© 2005 Edwin B. Young

Published by Serendipity House Publishers
Nashville, Tennessee

In cooperation with Fellowship Church Resources
Dallas, Texas

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117 10th Avenue North, Nashville, TN 37234.

ISBN: 1-5749-4183-6

Dewey Decimal Classification: 306.81

Subject Headings:

MARRIAGE

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1-800-525-9563

www.SerendipityHouse.com



www.fellowshipchurch.com

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Small groups are a vital part of how we do ministry at Fellowship Church just as they are in many churches around the world. There are a number of different theories on how small groups should work, and they are all great in different ways. The book you are holding is written with our model in mind. So take a minute to read the following explanation, then feel free to adapt as necessary.

Each of our small groups practices a three-part agenda in every meeting. That agenda includes a social time, a discussion time, and a prayer time. Each of these elements share equal importance, but not necessarily equal time. To help you get the most out of this book, we have included an explanation of each of the parts.

The first element of every small-group meeting should be a time of socializing. This phase of the meeting should be about 30% of your time together. Welcome everyone as they arrive at the host home; make visitors feel welcome by introducing yourself and showing genuine interest in them. Enjoy some snacks, or if your group prefers, a meal together. Then move on to the second part of the meeting—the lesson.

The lesson itself may take as much as 50% of your group's meeting time. You may want to start this phase with a short "icebreaker" to get everyone talking. The questions in the "Start It Up" section of each session are what we refer to as "level the playing field" questions that everyone can participate in, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity or Bible knowledge. As your group moves through the "Talk It Up" section in each meeting, remember that it is more important to finish on time than to finish each question. It is okay to skip some questions to allow enough time to take care of the third phase of your small-group time: "Lift It Up."

The "Lift It Up" section is a vital part of every small-group meeting and should take about 20% of your time. You will be able to share with the group what God is doing in your life as well as asking the group to support you in specific prayers. To help focus this time, there are one or two questions that will prompt prayers based on the material you just covered. There is also a space for you to write down your prayer requests so you don't forget them and so you can communicate them clearly when it is your turn. Below that is a place to write down the prayer requests of the people in your group so you can remember to pray for each request throughout the week.

As an additional tool to assist you in your spiritual development journey, 10 devotionals lead up to each of the Sessions 2 through 6. Ten devotionals are provided to accommodate groups that meet every other week, giving material for five days per week during that two-week interval. If you meet weekly, ask your group members to choose at least five devotionals each week. These will help you develop a daily quiet time with God. To get the absolute most from this book, I challenge you to take 5 or 10 minutes a day to read and apply these devotionals in your life.

God's best! Ed

MARRIAGE UNVEILED

Some studies find that 50% of marriages end in divorce—that’s as many as half of them! And while that is probably not the kind of uplifting message you would expect to see at the beginning of a biblical study on marriage, it is a fact that cannot be ignored.

Too many people enter marriage with false expectations. They think marriage is a cure-all. And they fall prey to believing marriage is easy—they’ll never fight, the trash will always be taken out on time, dinner will never get burned, and sexual intimacy will be automatic. But marriage on the rugged plains of reality doesn’t always shape up that way. Life after the honeymoon requires a lot of dedication and hard work.

My wife Lisa and I have been married for over 20 years, and people say to us all the time, “Your marriage is so great. You two really have it all figured out, don’t you?” And while it’s true that our marriage is great, it doesn’t mean we have it all figured out. We have our share of struggles, just like any other couple. After all, we’re human. But the strength of our marriage comes from the hard work we put into it. Our marriage is great because we fight for it.

Marriage is tough. There’s no doubt about it. And that’s why in this study we’re going to “lift the veil.” We’re going to discuss the real life struggles that we all face in marriage. And we’ll expose the false expectations associated with marriage in our culture. You’re going to discover just what it takes to do marriage God’s way and ultimately unleash the awesome potential that your relationship holds.

Through this study, I want to equip you and your spouse with the tools necessary to fight for your marriage and keep it strong. And as you dedicate yourself to prayer, honesty, and openness during this time together, you and your spouse can discover the amazing plan God has for your marriage.



Sealing the Deal

Genesis 12:1-4, 15:7-21; Ephesians 5:21-33

The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:32 that marriage is a mystery, and most of us would say, “Tell us something else we don’t know!” Human relationships are always complex, and none more so than the relationship between a husband and wife. How can two different people, with different backgrounds and life experiences, join together and become “one”? How can they stay together in this time and culture when families are breaking up right and left? How can they not only stay together, but stay in love? Marriage is a mystery—but we know the Author. As we study the Bible, we find that He gives us boundaries and principles for marriages that will both honor Him and give us great satisfaction. We’ll begin unveiling this mystery by looking at two important words: contract and covenant.

START IT UP

Take a few minutes to introduce yourselves to one another.

1. When you hear the word “contract,” what is the first thing you think of? What kind of contract or agreement have you dealt with recently?
2. What are some ways, even as children, that we make “contract agreements” with others?

SESSION ONE

SMALL-GROUP SESSION

TALK IT UP

A World of Contracts

We live in a contract-crazy culture. Stop and think about the contracts in your life. Most of us have several legally binding agreements—a cell phone plan, apartment lease, car loan, or business agreement. You can't even work out at a gym without signing a contract! A “contract” is defined as: an agreement between two or more parties, especially one that is written and enforceable by law.

3. Why are contracts necessary?
4. When is it appropriate to end a contract?
When is it not appropriate?

We can get out of a contract if one party doesn't fulfill the terms of the deal. Don't like your phone service? Pay a fee to cancel—contract over. Don't pay your loan, the bank takes the car—contract over. Tenants trash the apartment, you kick them out and keep the deposit—contract over. Your spouse no longer makes you happy, get a divorce—contract over. Right?

Broken Contracts, Broken Lives

In our culture, marriage is viewed as a contract. The question is: how *good* is the contract? Some studies find 50% of all marriages end in divorce. Of those who don't divorce, many are not happy together. Other studies have suggested that up to 75% of all marriages are headed for serious trouble. Would you lease a car, knowing you had only a 50% chance it would run? Would you sign up for a cell phone, knowing 50% of your calls would not go through? How many would step onto an airplane with a 50% chance of crashing and burning? Not many would sign a contract on these terms. Yet, if we believe this research, many of us should plan on divorce.

SESSION ONE

SMALL-GROUP SESSION

However, if we view marriage as God does, we *need not* plan on divorce. God views marriage as a covenant. A “covenant” is much deeper than a contract; it seals an “all or nothing” commitment. Even if your marriage is unhappy and you are thinking about divorce, if you grasp this concept of “covenant marriage,” there’s hope. God can redeem a covenant marriage.

5. If we view marriage as a contract, how could that affect our daily actions and attitudes?

God’s Model for Relationships

The two most intimate relationships known to humans—the relationship with God and the relationship between spouses—are both founded on covenants. To understand more about God’s kind of covenant, let’s turn to His covenant with Abraham, the father of the entire nation of Israel.

Read Genesis 15:7-21

Earlier, God had told Abram that his descendants would become a great nation, and through them the whole earth would be blessed. Because God is God, Abram took Him at His word, and moved ahead (Genesis 12:1-4).

Later God initiated another covenant with Abraham, illustrating His faithfulness in a vivid way Abraham would never forget. The word “covenant” comes from a word that means, “to cut.” Two people making a covenant would split animals, and then walk together between the bloody halves, sealing their covenant in a “blood bond.” This “walk of death” was a graphic symbol stating, “If I turn my back on this solemn covenant, may God do to me what we did to these animals.” Making a covenant was serious, public, and expected to last for life—an unbreakable commitment.

6. Reflect back on your answers to question 5. How might a couples’ marriage change if they viewed it as an unbreakable covenant for life?

SESSION ONE

SMALL-GROUP SESSION

Covenant is in the very nature of God. God made covenants with His people, beginning with Noah and Abraham, and ending with the New Covenant, the covenant sealed in Jesus' blood, which opened the way for each of us to freely approach God and to spend eternity with Him.

Covenant Commitment at Home

It would be easy to say, "Yes, we know God is a covenant God, but does that mean marriage is a covenant? Does He actually say that? After all, we're not like God; we're not perfect. Wouldn't it be easier to consider marriage a contract just in case it we don't like it or it doesn't work out?"

Yes, God takes marriage very seriously. The Bible clearly says that He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). He designed marriage to be a special, living picture of His own love and commitment for His people. Divorce not only destroys people God loves; it mars and distorts the symbol of His love too.

Read Ephesians 5:21-33

7. What is the relationship between submission and love? How do they work together?

8. How do we show submission to Christ? Why do we submit to Christ?

9. What do verses 25 and 28-29 say about Jesus' commitment to us? In what ways can we apply this commitment to the relationship between husband and wife?

Covenant marriage requires bending and strength and wisdom. Jonathan Kuntz said it well, "Marriage is not the easiest thing, it's the hardest thing." But when it's done God's way, in covenant, it will be the most incredible relationship next to your relationship with God.

SESSION ONE

SMALL-GROUP SESSION

The Power of Vows

Because marriage is a covenant, the covenant ceremony is very important. Even though our culture neglects the covenant nature of marriage, we haven't lost the importance of the ceremony. Interestingly, many people still use the old traditional wedding vows. While these vows are not in the Bible, they do reflect Scripture, showing the importance and solemnity of the promises being made. The covenant is made in the presence of God, and in the presence of our friends and relatives, as a public commitment.

Read the Traditional Wedding Vows

In the presence of God and these witnesses, and by a holy covenant, I, _____ (husband's name), joyfully receive you as God's perfect gift for me, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love you, to honor you, to cherish you and protect you, forsaking all others as long as we both shall live.

In the presence of God and these witnesses, and by a holy covenant, I, _____ (wife's name), joyfully receive you as God's perfect gift for me, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love you, to honor you, to respect you, forsaking all others as long as we both shall live.

- 10. In what ways does our traditional Christian marriage ceremony reflect and illustrate God's covenant relationship with His people?**

- 11. These vows don't mention happiness or the fulfillment of emotional needs. Is this just an old fashioned oversight? What place should these needs claim in a covenant marriage?**

SESSION ONE

SMALL-GROUP SESSION

LIFT IT UP

The Bible says, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (Ephesians 5:25). This is how Jesus loves each of us: unconditionally. We can thank God we are not in a contract with Jesus because we’ve all failed again and again. Instead, we are in a covenant relationship with Jesus. He didn’t say, “I’ve had enough. You’re not meeting my needs. You’re sinning too much. Your heart’s not faithful enough.” Jesus loved us so much that He gave up His life for us, just so we could be washed clean and presented to Him like a beautiful bride. His love is forever, not because we are so wonderful or perfect, but because He is wonderful and perfect.

- 12. Have you said, “Yes!” to Jesus’ unconditional, covenant love? If you haven’t taken this step, others in your group would love to pray with you now so you can establish a relationship with God.**

Take time to praise and thank God for the covenant relationship He has initiated. Then, pray together, asking God to help each of you in strengthening your marriage covenants and freshly renewing your vows.

My Prayer Needs:

My Group’s Prayer Needs:



DEVOTIONALS

DAY 1

Lost That Lovin’ Feeling

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:11-12).

A story is told of a woman who complained to her friend about her husband. “I just don’t see how I can be expected to love him,” she said. “He is not acting like a good husband.” The friend suggested that she was still obliged to love him as a brother in Christ. “Well, I don’t think he really is. He doesn’t act like a Christian.” The friend then reminded her that Jesus taught us to “love our neighbors as ourselves,” even unbelievers. The woman replied, “He doesn’t deserve to be called my neighbor. He is my enemy.” But didn’t Jesus even say, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”?

God’s kind of love isn’t based on “how I feel.” It isn’t based on what people “deserve.” God’s kind of love is a decision; it is step-by-step obedience as we try to learn to be like Him. Love isn’t easy, but when we commit to reacting with love, the feelings will follow.

Think about the most significant relationships in your life. Are you “feeling your way” into loving actions, or are you “acting your way” into feeling loving? What loving action(s) can you start with? Ask God to give you His love for those people.

DEVOTIONALS

DAY 4

Green with Envy

It [love] ... does not envy (1 Corinthians 13:4b).

Envy is a devoted fan of another's failure. When we envy, we are essentially saying, "I am the most important. I should have that good thing instead of you." James 3:16 tells us that envy produces disorder. Envy also produces an ugly tongue. Many times, it is envy that leads us to slander or criticize others. We seek to feel more important by tearing others down. Envy is the essential "me-focused" attitude. Envy turns inward, but love turns outward. Love does not envy because love means putting the other person first—every time.

The best way to combat envy is to develop an attitude of gratitude, thanking God for who He is first of all, and then for who He made you to be and who He has made your spouse to be.

The envy that can mar your love might not be direct envy of your spouse. Sometimes envy of the good relationships your friends have can make you wrongly critical of your own husband or wife. Where do you see evidence of even small amounts of envy in your relationship with your spouse?



BEFORE SESSION TWO
DEVOTIONALS

DAY 5

The View from the Pedestal

it [love] ... does not boast, it is not proud (1 Corinthians 13:4b).

Pride looks down its nose at you; love looks you in the eye as an equal. Pride is never wrong; love is the first to admit fault. Pride demands service; love serves. Pride boasts about itself; love listens. In our hearts and minds, we rank people and relationships according to their importance. As humans, our default setting always puts “Self” in the number one spot; and that is the definition of pride.

When pride whispers in our ears, “No one is noticing what you’re doing,” it’s easy to become boastful in an effort to gain the attention we “deserve.” Many times we want to brag about ourselves because we fear that we are not really significant—that others will never notice us. Instead, we need to follow the way of love, turning off the personal commercial and opening our hearts and our ears to the needs of others.

Is this something that you wish your spouse would notice without prompting? Is there something that makes you feel superior to your spouse? Ask God to chip away at your pride and build in its place a servant’s attitude.

DEVOTIONALS

DAY 6

Rude is Never “In”

It [love] ... is not rude, it is not self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:5a).

Rudeness is probably one of the easiest “un-loves” we can fall into. It happens before we know it. Sometimes it’s a simple oversight. We’re so wrapped up in ourselves that we never even notice the needs of others. So we tromp on them as we rush on our own way. Other times, rudeness is a weapon we use to hurt those we supposedly love. We would not hit that person. Oh, no! But we don’t mind throwing little poisonous verbal darts at them. Rudeness is essentially a way of saying, “I don’t care about you. I don’t care if you are hurt. I don’t value you, your ideas, or your love. You are not worth my being polite.” Sometimes we are not even aware of the messages we send when we are rude.

Paraphrase this verse in a positive sense: “Love shows how much it values others by its courteous actions; it puts the interests and needs of others first.” When we consistently practice seeking the good of others in our actions, our heart attitude will follow.

Look back over your week. Have you been rude—either in your words or actions? If you have, the cure begins by coming clean with that person and asking for forgiveness.

DEVOTIONALS

DAY 7

Resetting your Defaults

it [love] ... is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5b).

This verse goes right back to the subject of patience and selflessness. Because most of us still spend a lot of our time on our default setting, with “Self” in the number one spot, we do get angry easily. When we perceive that someone is rude to us or we feel we are not being valued enough, we jump to anger. We assume the worst of others and quickly flare up. Even worse, we store up memories of other times this person has offended us and hoard them.

It's hard to fight that feeling of being badly treated. When we start to get hot under the collar, saying: “I can't believe he (or she) did that to me,” it is really hard to hold that anger back. But if we will make the decision to love and to wait before we get mad, we will save ourselves a lot of pain and grief. It's important to notice here that God does not say: “love never gets angry.” Sometimes it is right to be angry; it can even be the loving thing to do. Righteous anger is the right response when we see someone being abused or the weak being led into wickedness. But don't be quick to get angry. Wait; be patient and forgiving first.

Do you see yourself as someone with a long fuse or a short fuse? Jot down some examples. While it is true that some people are more laid back than others, none of us has any excuse for not working on an anger problem. Practice counting to 10 when you start to feel angry ... before you say anything.



DEVOTIONALS

DAY 10

The Big Three

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Love is the greatest because it is the one thing that will last through eternity. One day, we won't need faith anymore because we will see everything for real. We won't need hope anymore because we will possess all that we ever hoped and dreamed. But love keeps on. The love of God will surround us and fill us, and we will experience incredible joy.

We live by faith because we cannot see what God has in store for us. We live in hope because we trust His words and anticipate eternity with Him. These things are great and good. But when we practice God's kind of love, we taste the real thing. God is love and when we are filled with His love and reaching out to others in love, we experience a little bit of heaven on earth.

The way to experience God is through obedience. Even if you do not feel anything much right now, walking in the way of love will bring you into a depth of relationship and intimacy you never knew existed. What are some actions you can take to show your love and commitment to your spouse?
