

**God's Design For Marriage**  
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Marriage, it's a good thing— right? The Bible says it is. But, the way we talk about it is downright confusing.

- How many young people grow up with the idea of a grand adventure, an ultimate arrival at contentment and rest in the arms of Another— not Jesus, but a spouse? How many others experience broken homes and families and can't get far enough away from that kind of commitment?
- How many prayers has God heard about current crushes and future spouses? And how many about broken hearts and regrets after a break-up? How much of life is spent in the what-ifs and why God questions?
- How many journals are filled with plans for weddings to someone who will truly love them someday? How many expectations are set towards blessed sex and deep relational satisfaction?
- How many pop songs are about romantic love? (We checked statistics on that one: it's at least 67% since 1960.) How many couples have failed to find what was promised?

Well, that's the culture— right? The church must be doing better. I mean, it's not like the church cooks in the pot of the culture around it. We're set apart! Sunday School basics: in the world, not of it— right?

"Have you ever tried to talk her?" "He never listens." "Always remember: your spouse is always right." "You know him, he's never wrong." "Life lesson: happy wife, happy life." "We always argue about this." "The old ball and chain." Those phrases are about as mindless as humor goes. But, I first heard most of them IN THE CHURCH, not outside it. We don't put them in our social media posts. But they frequent our homes, workplaces, and church gatherings in casual conversations and complaints. They show us the culture we swim in. And they betray our own practical theology of marriage.

**Let's be honest: marriage has been (1) idolized and (2) made utterly common.**

From the dreams of youth to the complaints of adulthood, marriage doesn't seem to deliver on the lifetime satisfaction guarantee. Many couples spend their days distracted (from each other), bored (with each other), irritated (at each other), wounded (by each other), bitter (towards each other), or numb about the whole arrangement. Roommates with history. Couples start speaking in the ways above that express hopelessness or disdain towards person they married. If we're honest: we aren't devoted, curious, affectionate, whole, rested, or zealous in this relationship that cuts the core of our experience of life on earth. We don't find our happily ever-after, so we throw out the sovereign circumstances of calling (singleness, marriage) and bargain for a better lot.

Most of us haven't given up yet— but we struggle to identify the real problem, so, we try various solutions of varying effectiveness. Some can be a great help: counseling, seminars, books, vacations, date nights, reconnecting, renewing vows, crucial conversations. Others are just as common: ignoring the issues, privately coping with the disappointment or stress, cheating (emotionally or physically), focusing on the kids, ending the arrangement.

**But here's the point: What is marriage for? What is the purpose? Why are we here?**

## **THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE: WORSHIP**

God has purpose in everything He does, and a calling upon your life in response. He is bringing about both His glory and our worship. Knowing God. Walking in the Spirit. Being loved by Jesus and expressing that love back to Him.

Are you thinking, "Worship? That cannot be it, it's too simple." Indeed, marriage yields all kinds of fruit. And our Confession says the purpose is "godly offspring" and "resisting temptation" and "mutual help and companionship." But think about it: if I succeed in those things (and all the other things in life and marriage), but do not grow in my relationship to God, did I succeed?

**Marriage is a spiritual institution, made holy by the blood of Christ, and made real by the Holy Spirit.** It's a spiritual reality ("what God has joined together, let no man separate"), set down by God way back in the far reaches of time. If you start reading a Bible from the front cover, within a few chapters you're already learning a TON about marriage, its beginnings, and its current state. If you start reading in the Gospels, you'll heard Jesus speak quite simply about marriage: "'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning...'" (Matthew 19:4-6).

But, marriage is not holy just by existing, any more than a human being is holy just by existing. Things are made holy (set apart for God) by God's presence and purpose—and the shed blood of Jesus. Marriage is made holy His sovereign choice to descend and make His home among us. It's something He died and rose to do, but requires submission in us (John 14:23). Likewise, being "spiritual" is not the normal state of human existence. Being spiritual in the way the New Testament describes it means being enlivened by the Holy Spirit. **Marriage is "spiritual" when the Holy Spirit is involved.**

So, the real question: **Is the Spirit in my marriage?** Go ahead and ask yourself. We get to be honest about these things. We have a good God— who isn't afraid of tough questions or broken answers. Am I submitting to the Holy Spirit, in my marriage?

The good news here: Marriage gets to be about worship. It's a playground of sanctification— the journey of being made like the Lord we love. It's a training field in surrender to my heavenly Father— learning to cry with our Savior, “not my will, but Yours be done.” Eugene Peterson puts it graciously:

*“I had supposed when I entered marriage that it was mostly about sexuality, domesticity, companionship, and children. The surprise was that I was in a graduate school for spirituality—prayer and God—with daily assignments and frequent exams in matters of the will...”*

## **THE FIRST POSTURE OF MARRIAGE: REPENTANCE TO GOD**

Let's get behavioral with all this. What are the biblical postures of marriage that allow me to worship God in the midst of it?

We can agree what they are not: Manipulation (using a person to get what I want), Competition (for the kids' affection or the upper-hand in an argument), Dominance (emotional or psychological), Passivity (laziness or hopelessness), Grumbling (to my spouse or to others about my spouse), or Comparison (the thief of joy). Those postures revolve around one person: me. The kind of worship those postures facilitate: the worship of self.

There is irony here. Go back to your Genesis reading:

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him”... Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:16-18; 24-25)*

*But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. God said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen 3:4-8; 11-13)*

What broke marriage? Was it unhappiness? Marital conflict? Financial insecurity? Adultery? No. It was sin. Defiance in the human spirit to the Spirit of God. Adultery of the heart, against the Creator. Worshipping myself instead of the Lord who loves me. We (humans) were made for worship. Marriage is the first cultural institution of that worship— and the first casualty of our selfishness. It turns out that desiring and taking what makes God unhappy, ends in our own practical and eternal unhappiness.

***So: if the purpose of marriage is worship, the first posture of marriage is repentance for a lack of worship.***

Repentance means a change of mindset; a turning from sin to God. The weight of marriage is not my inability to please my spouse, but the reality of a God I have neglected in the pursuit of pleasing my self. “Happy wife, happy life” is problematic, not because of wives, but because of humans in general. It’s a bald lie. We can’t be made eternally happy by anyone less than God. Christians are those who have stepped out of the darkness into the light on this happiness issue: we no longer make our home in the fickle happiness of self or others. The Lord will not make His home in a marriage that worships self or spouse. Saint Paul writes: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7-8). Larry Crabb elaborates:

*"Biblically, the flesh is the energy of self-interest: I want something. Give it to me. I'll manipulate, cajole, persuade, play nice, do whatever it takes to get from you what I wrongly believe is essential to my soul health."*

There is an energy to self-interest! You feel it every day. It gets us out of bed in the morning. It makes the world turn. And it reduces my marriage to the pleasures of someone who is not God.

Every day in marriage, we can repent to God for a lack of worship. Practically, this posture in marriage looks like:

- **I own my mistakes.** The Holy Spirit loves to bring this about in us.
- **I confess my brokenness.** It’s okay, none of us are quite who we thought we were.
- **I ask difficult questions**— ones we might not want to answer.
- **I listen closely to my spouse**— as if he/she truly is a complex human created in the image of God.

Honesty isn’t comfortable. But neither is denial. I’m likely not the person I thought I was (or said I was) on our first date. Marriage reveals cracks in the veneer. Marriage is an opportunity to find out, with another person, who I really am, and bring that to God in prayer. That creates honesty in my worship— and the possibility of vulnerability in marriage.

## THE SECOND POSTURE OF MARRIAGE IS REVERENCE FOR CHRIST

What does a posture of repentance make room for? Worship. Reverence. **Without reverence, there is no worship.** If marriage is going to be worship, it needs to revere and honor God. Translated otherwise: worshipful marriage fears the Lord. In a state of worship I was made for, I see God as infinitely valuable and myself as infinitely in need of His free grace. Eugene Peterson writes of “awed, worshipful attentiveness, ready to respond in love and adoration.” This is the OPPOSITE of a self-centered posture in marriage. True reverence for God wrecks the old ways of manipulation, competition, dominance, passivity, grumbling, and comparison (the thief of joy). It may even bring my joy back. But, it will hurt a bit.

*“And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord... For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her...” (Ephesians 5:21-22, 25)*

Grab your Bible and look at these verses in context. Who got off easy in these commands? Many men seem to think it's the husbands: they don't have to “submit.” But verse 21 introduces the bare fact that the whole Christian community is called to “submit to one another.” This is the starting line of real community in the Spirit: Christians submitting to one another in the fear and awe of the Lord. Within the context of marriage, a wife is asked to step into this posture by submitting to her husband. But, does the husband's call to “love your wives just as Christ loved the church” really seem less? “He gave His life for her,” Paul goes on.

I wonder if we Christians have seen too little of this type of marital submission to readily grasp it. Maybe couples struggle with reverence for Christ in marriage to the degree that our churches haven't learned to submit to Spirit of Christ? It's probably a solid biblical statistic that humanity doesn't like submitting to God. We rarely know how to do it in a healthy way. And when others submit to us, we easily misuse it. As my wife wrote: “Humility produces a loving response to another's submission. Pride produces a power response. And humans like power.”

But the gospel shows us a God who both commands our submission AND is trustworthy to receive it. Our response of worship meets the God who is a joyful Creator, a delighted Giver, a doting Father, a slain Lamb, a good King, a ready Savior, a wise Counselor, a sovereign Lord, and an earnest Friend. The deepest reality of eternity (past, present, future) is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in submission and deepest communion with one another— before any galaxy, blade of grass, human heart, or broken marriage had been brought into existence. By the blood of the Son, we are invited onto that holy ground. But the path will require reverence— lest we worship a domesticated god of our own imagining.

What does the Holy Spirit create in me? Submission to God. Respect for husbands. Love for wives. Ready repentance to God. Deep reverence for Christ. Honoring speech. Fidelity in worship and in marriage.

## PRACTICE INTIMACY

#1 Ask Questions About Your Culture. The reality is: **couples create culture**. And that culture creates disciples, far more than the words we speak or the church we sing with on Sundays. So, ask the question: what is our culture as a couple?

- Are we curious? Do we listen closely?
- Are we quick to own our mistakes?
- Do we have (or avoid) tough conversations?
- Do we pray together? Are those prayers desperate for Jesus, or casual?
- Do we allow emotions (mine or my spouse's) to dominate the relationship?
- Do we manipulate or cajole to get satisfying responses from each other?
- What are our conflicts like? Do I win arguments or go passive? Why?
- If I have resentment, what healthy boundaries do I need to draw?

#2 Practice Intimacy... *“Every act of intimacy, whether in work or [friendship] or marriage or prayer, suppresses willfulness and cultivates willingness”* (Eugene Peterson). If this is true, we should start practicing honesty and intimacy, whether we feel it or not. Willingness— the basic movement of faith— is really all I bring to spiritual life with Jesus. And even that, I have to ask Him for.

So, pray together or privately and ask God for the power to submit to His Spirit. Ask for intimacy with your spouse. Then, start practicing these simple phrases from Larry Crabb in marriage (and other relationships):

- Listen: “I’m all ears.”
- Explore: “Tell me more.”
- Discover: “So that’s what you’re feeling.”
- Touch: “I want to be with you where you are, with no greater good than letting you know I am for you.”

These phrases communicate value. And they invite you to leave behind the self-centered orbit of common marriage, and enter into the God-centered orbit of worship. Submitting to the Spirit in repentance and reverence as you see and learn and listen to your spouse with discernment and freshness as a saint, not fear and defensiveness as a sinner.

The final word of encouragement from Larry Crabb: “If the relationship never improves, you will still be in close fellowship with Jesus. You will know Kingdom joy in the midst of profound relational disappointment.”

### **Resources:**

Eugene Peterson, <https://www.tumblr.com/aliteralness/157111946885/eugene-peterson-on-willed-passivity>

Larry Crabb, <https://largerstory.com/blog-archive/couples-who-dont-connect-what-then/>