

## I want to be better in my marriage

-Our current series is based off of the #1 New Year's Resolution for 2017 (I want to be a better person). An admission or some haunting idea or suspicion that life is not turning out the way they have envisioned it and they don't know why.

- We have been talking about a lot of areas that people feel overwhelmed in or discouraged in. We have covered a lot of ground and topics in this series:

I want to be better in: me, in my work, in my sex life, as a mom and in my past.

Key principle in life: **DIE to LIVE**. Sounds scary but it's actually very freeing.

-It means that in your relationships, you have to die a little bit in order for them to work. (Die to your selfishness, your way of doing things, your perspective only, your past).

So we are once again diving into an area where people can feel not only overwhelmed & discouraged but also frustrated, confused and at times deeply hurt and broken.

Today I want to focus on marriage b/c I believe that marriage is important to everyone in this room. It should be important to you if you are married but it also includes those of you who want to marry, or want to remarry some day. It's also important to all parents, whether your kids are 11, 21 or 41. It's important if you're a single parent b/c part of your responsibility is equipping your kids when it comes to their future marriage.

Share my story of talking to a young lady at Lowe's. "It just isn't worth it".

Maybe you can relate.

Look around and we see a world that is not pro marriage. We live in a culture that hates unity that hates faithfulness and hates monogamy.

We are told by culture in a subtle or not-so-subtle way:

- "If you're not compatible, you married the wrong person."
- "The grass is greener on the other side."
- "If you're not happy, don't stay in the situation. You deserve more than that."
- "Your spouse should know how to meet *all* your needs."
- "Divorce is always an *easy* option."
- "Maybe you've just fallen out of love."
- "A little innocent flirting or some pornography won't hurt your marriage. Your spouse will never even know about it."
- Marriage is the "old ball and chain" or the "world's smallest handcuff".

It's easy to start believing the lies that come at us every single day or at the least being influenced by them. Divorce rates are hovering around 50%. Millennials are waiting longer than other generation before them to get married. Divorce rates for Baby

Boomers, 50+ has doubled in the last 25 years. For those 65+ the divorce rate has tripled since 1990.

23% of men and 19% of women have admitted to cheating on their spouse.

Marriage is not a statistic; it's a story. And it's a story that God wove into the very fabric of our world. Marriage is at its core a love story and it was created to be a living, breathing picture drawn out before the eyes of the world so they might see God's heart. So, we might see the great love of God. So, we might know that God's love is true and that He is still willing to pursue us.

So, before we go any further, let's actually look through one passage of scripture to get a snapshot of what God created marriage to look like. And while the Bible doesn't have a tremendous amount to say about marriage it does have some powerful things to share with us and it has some amazing advice on relationships in general that can certainly be applied to a marriage.

**Ephesians 5:1, 2, 21 – 33 (MSG)** *<sup>1-2</sup> Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.*

*<sup>21</sup> Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.*

*<sup>22-24</sup> Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.*

*<sup>25-28</sup> Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already "one" in marriage.*

*<sup>29-33</sup> No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and **cherishes** his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh."*

*This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband.*

Cherish: to hold or treat as dear; feel love for. To care for tenderly; nurture.

One + One = Us. (*No longer two, they become "one flesh."*)

How's your one + one, your *Us* doing?

**Struggling:** You seems to be stuck in the rut of tension. There may be moments of laughter and hope but they are rare. One, or both of you may be thinking (or saying):  
"We can't quit fighting".

"I never dreamed it would be this bad."

"I'm not sure how much longer I can keep doing this."

**Surviving:** You are functioning in your marriage but it isn't doing great. You may describe your marriage as: fine, okay, busy, distracted, disconnected or maybe "not on the same page".

One, or both of you may be thinking (or saying):

"We are just going through the motions."

"We are essentially just living like roommates."

"We don't have any time for US."

But deep down you know you didn't get married just to survive.

**Growing:** This couple is doing well, enjoying their marriage and drawing closer to one another.

One, or both of you may be thinking (or saying):

"We're best friends and really love spending time together!"

"We're doing good, really good!"

"The intimacy is better than ever!"

Depending on where you are currently at in your *Us* you may be feeling: excited, depressed, frustrated, hopeless, hopeful, doubtful or even overwhelmed.

October 7, 1990, almost 27 years ago, I married an amazing woman. Anita and I have gone through heartaches and pain together and we have experienced incredible joy and intimacy along the way.

Share wedding Picture and 25<sup>th</sup> year Anniversary Picture.

Those smiles didn't convince me. It's the look of we don't have a clue what we're doing!  
I hope this works!

26 + years later we've learned a lot about one another and are still learning. We are still learning how to truly love each other & listen to one another through the good times and not so good times.

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your Us.

We probably all have habits we have tried to change and been unsuccessful like losing weight or eating healthier or even staying organized. But marital habits are different b/c they are relational and b/c they are relational they carry emotion. And they play out in the everyday interactions we have with our spouse.

When you choose to respond kindly instead of responding in a harsh tone.

When you thank your spouse for providing for the family.

When you help clean the house w/o being asked too.

When you decide to laugh off something trivial instead of picking a fight.

It's in those type of moments, when we connect with our spouse instead of disconnecting, that growth takes place in our marriages.

Most marriages don't usually break apart from the big things. Most die a slow death over time due to bad marital habits. *Apathy kills more marriages than adultery.*

From here on I want to get really practical about some 4 habits, that work in the real world of real couples and can help struggling marriages, surviving marriages and growing marriages take steps forward.

### Schedule to Connect.

Fun. If someone had asked you before you got married if you wanted your future spouse to be fun, what would you have said?

One of the best ways to protect your marriage is to enjoy your marriage. That's where fun comes in.

Fun Barriers:

**Busyness:** laundry, kid's soccer practice, big meeting this week, dad's doctor appt.

**Children:** We love our kids but it's easy to center all our attention on them and all too easy to forget about pouring into Us. When the kids are gone, we can work on Us. I don't know you.

**Exhaustion:** The rat race of life takes all our energy. No energy, no fun.

**Daily responsibilities:** work, bills, aging parents. We have people depending on us to come through. Who has time for fun?!?

Who, What, When, Where, How?

**Daily Conversation.** The average couple spends *four minutes* a day in meaningful conversation. What was your high and low of the day? What do I need to know for tonight, tomorrow or this week? Tell me about your best conversation of the day? What was the most encouraging thing you heard today?

**Date Night.**

Weekly would be great but may not be possible. Breakfast or lunch would be ideal. (Anita and I having lunch when she worked full time w/small kids). Bi-monthly or even monthly. Just start somewhere.

Who: Us

What: Dinner and walk on the beach

When: Friday

Where: Sharky's

How: Husband is responsible for securing a babysitter.

In what areas am I doing well? In what area(s) can I improve? How can I specifically do that? Is there one target area where you need more?

**Sex.** Yes, schedule it! Won't that take away the spontaneity of it? I'm not suggesting sex should never be spontaneous but scheduling it never hurts and it almost always helps. When you get busy with other things if it's not scheduled it probably won't happen and one of you is going to be disappointed.

Typically have one spouse who is ready for sex, while the other spouse needs time to warm up to the idea. As Pastor Matt shared: One of you is a Crock – Pot and the other is a microwave. Scheduling sex is like turning on the Crock – Pot.

Fun is not always easy but it is always necessary for a great marriage. Fun experiences bring us together so schedule consistent time for fun in your marriage.

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us* so **schedule to connect.**

### **Start with God**

All too often in our marriages we do things we don't want to do and we don't do things we want to do.

Examples: Come home beat from a long day at work.

Spouse says something that hurts our feelings and we shut them out for a few days.

Why do we do that? Why can't we do better?

So, what do we do when we find ourselves stuck there?

Try harder? Stick it out for the kids? Don't believe in divorce so stick it out as roommates? Stop trying, separate and/or divorce.

From personal experience: despite the common nature of divorce today, it hurts as much as ever, and the consequences trigger pain that echoes for years.

What if our marriages didn't depend solely our relationships with each other? They're important but there's another relationship that I believe matters more; your individual relationship with God.

**Loving God in your individual life greatly impacts your married life.**

When our connection with God is growing, it puts us in a place to love others better than we could love them on our own. Connection with God makes us better spouse, which helps become a better Us. When we are connected with God something changes in us that impacts what come out of us.

*Galatians 5:22 – 23a <sup>22</sup> But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control.*

Doesn't this describe the person you want to be? Wouldn't your spouse want you to be loving, patient, kind, self – controlled and so on? I can't be all that! That's the point.

God wants to help you be a better you but we have to do our part. We have to start w/ Him. When we are connected to the One who is the source of all these things we can love in a way we could never love on our own.

How do you connect to God?

I personally connect incredibly well in nature. The quietness of the woods or the beauty of a lake or the gulf when I'm fishing. Read a daily devotional.

Join a Bridge Group. Talk to God on the way to work. Pray before you reconnect with your spouse after work. Read a chapter a day from the N.T. for a month.

Find your way to talk to God and read His words, the Bible. When we seek Him, he will reveal himself to us and in our Us. We learn how to love Him and how to love others.

When we start with God we become more of who he wants us to be and more of who our spouse needs us to be. When we connect with God it changes us as individuals and it changes our Us.

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us* so **start with God.**

### **Speak the Language**

Women say: "I need to run to the mall for a few things" or "I don't have anything to wear". Men say: "I'll be home in a little bit" or "I'm almost done".

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman. How to express heartfelt commitment to your spouse.

### **Words of Affirmation.**

"If this is your love language, you feel most cared for when your partner is open and expressive in telling you how wonderful they think you are, how much they appreciate you, etc."

### Quality Time.

"This love language is about being together, fully present and engaged in the activity at hand, no matter how trivial."

### Gifts.

"Your partner taking the time to give you a gift can make you feel appreciated."

### Acts of Service.

"If your partner offering to watch the kids so you can go to the gym (or relieving you of some other task) gets your heart going, then this is your love language."

### Physical Touch.

"This love language is just as it sounds. A warm hug, a kiss, touch, and sexual intimacy make you feel most loved when this is your love language."

What do I do that makes you feel the most loved? What do you desire above all else? What do I fail to do or say that you wish I would do?

You and I get to choose how we act and respond to our spouse, and that is a beautiful thing.

If your spouse loves gifts, buy them one.

If your spouse loves words of encouragement, write them a note. Send them a text.

If your spouse tends to like sex more often than you, have more sex.

If your spouse wants you to spend time with them, carve out the time.

If your spouse loves affection, hug them & kiss them more often.

Whatever speaks love to your spouse, speak it.

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us* so **speak the language.**

### Stay the course

Many of you, like me, stood before a group of family and friends and made a vow, a promise that we would love for:

"Richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, for better or worse, until death do us part." I have couples repeat those promises every wedding I do unless they write their own vows.

The question is: Is it fair to expect anyone to live up to them?

Many people say: "I didn't sign up for this". "It was great when we were dating but they turned into a different person once we got married". I never dreamed he would turn into a workaholic.

Maybe you've had challenges so deep you have considered or are considering separation or divorce. And here's the hard truth: If there's verbal or physical abuse you need to be apart for a while.

But for most couples, divorce is not the solution to their marital problems. It usually only makes everything worse.

So, what do we do? We can choose to love better. We can choose how we respond to our spouse in the same way we choose how we treat the other people in our lives.

Unfortunately, in marriage, and I have been guilty of this, we often give our spouse the worst of us because we can.

When we choose to love on days when our spouse's behavior is not lovely, we stay the course. When we choose to love our spouse over loving our need to be right, we stay the course.

When we day by day, challenge by challenge stay the course our Us can become even more precious than we imagined on the day we said "I do".

The Me mindset: Is this marriage working for me? This is a relationally lethal question b/c there are going to be seasons, days, weeks or months when your marriage isn't going to be working for you.

The Us mindset: **What am I doing to make this marriage work?** This is a totally different lens to view your marriage through. This is not a question for your spouse but a question for you.

When we constantly ask ourselves, "what am I doing to make this marriage work?" and then act on the answers to that question, it's a beautiful thing for our Us.

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us* so **stay the course**.

**Become intentional about investing in your Us.** It will NEVER happen by accident.

So, where do you need to "Die to Live"? In what area do you need to die a little in your marriage, in your Us, so it can live?

Schedule to Connect? Start with God? Speak the language? Stay the course?

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us*.

### Bridge Group Questions

1. What stood out to you or grabbed your attention in this teaching?
2. What are some of the subtle or not so subtle messages our culture tries to push on us regarding marriage? How does God's view of marriage differ?
3. Read Ephesians 5:1, 2 & 21 – 33 in the MESSAGE VERSION. How did Christ show His love to us? What are some ways a wife can support her husband? How



can a husband go “all out in love” for his wife? What can a husband do to cherish his wife? How can a wife show her husband honor?

4. Steve said: “One + One = Us. What things changed when you became an *Us*? How can decisions by one spouse affect your *Us*? What’s the greatest Joy of being an *Us*? What’s the greatest challenge?
5. Your habits either lead to the connection or disconnection of your *Us*. Steve mentioned 4 habits to consider: Schedule to Connect. Start with God. Speak the Language. Stay the Course. Which one comes more naturally for you? Which one will require the most work? Which one do you most need to implement in this season of your marriage? What steps will you take to do that?
6. How can Starting with God each day change you and change your *Us* for the better? What can get in your way of Starting with God daily? What steps will you take to clear those obstacles?
7. Do you know the Love Languages of your spouse - how they give and receive love? What are they? What are some benefits of understanding your spouse’s love languages in a marriage? (Questions to help find their love language: What do I do that makes you feel the most loved? What do you desire above all else? What do I fail to do or say that you wish I would do or say?)
8. Why do we sometimes give everyone else the best of us and give our spouse the worst of us? What can we do to change that?
9. The “ME” mindset asks the question: Is this marriage working for me? The *Us* mindset looks at it much differently: What am I doing to make this marriage work? Which mindset do you consistently lean into? What could change in your marriage if you consistently look at your marriage through the lens of the *Us* mindset?
10. Where do you need to be the most intentional *this week* in your marriage? In what area will you focus on for the next month to try and create a habit that will help lead to a stronger connection of your *Us*? What’s your first step?

Your habits either lead to the connection or the disconnection of your *Us*. Choose wisely.