

Introduction:

If you were to boil down the operational instructions for a marriage to just one instruction, one statement, what would it be? What instruction would you choose? Think about it. We have learned that the mission of marriage is to represent Christ and His church to the world in such a way that we spread the Sanctuary of God (Christ's church) all over the world filling it with image bearers of God who bring glory to Him. In short, our marriages are supposed to be lived out in such a way that the world says, "If that is what it is like to be in the church's relationship with Jesus Christ, I want in!" We know the husband is the head who will give account for how well that mission is accomplished and the wife is the helper who supports that mission. However, if you were to summarize the practical operating procedure by which a married couple accomplishes this mission in one statement, what would it be? I believe the overarching summation of the operating procedure for our marriages is simply this: Be One.

In **Genesis 2:24**, when woman is created and brought to the man, Moses breaks into the narrative and provides this commentary. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (ESV). Becoming one flesh is not, as so many seem to think, limited to sexual intimacy, though that is part of it. Moses was talking about unity, oneness. Consider the events that prompted Moses's statement. God had paraded all the creatures that had been made from the dust of the earth just as man had before Adam. Not one creature was found worthy to take the role as the embodiment of God's help to the man. So God caused a deep sleep to fall on the man, plucked a rib from Adam's side, and formed woman. Woman was bone from man's bone and flesh from man's flesh. Thus she was called woman because she was taken from man. Finally, a suitable helper. But to have that helper, Adam's flesh was cleaved in two. Becoming one flesh means uniting and acting in such a way as if restoring mankind to its "one flesh" beginning. Obviously, this is metaphorical. But it is behaving in marriage in such a way as if the rib had not been taken out, acting as one man.

With that in mind I want us to think about how to practically work out that operational standard. We've spent the last three weeks looking at the theological framework for our marriages. In this lesson, let's descend from the ivory tower and let the rubber hit the road. By the time we're done, we're going to know four principles that will help us operate as one in marriage. And be ready, I am going to challenge you to have a series of conversations, I believe fun ones, that will help you either maintain, increase, or rekindle your oneness.

Discussion:

I. Be Friends

- A. In **Song of Solomon 5:16**, the Shulammitte says of her groom, "This is my beloved and this is my friend."
- B. Having been part of four different two preacher arrangements with varying degrees of success, I am occasionally called by elders of congregations moving to a multi-preacher arrangement to get advice on how to make that arrangement work. Here is what I tell folks. If you want a good multi-preacher arrangement, then follow the conventional wisdom of clearly defining the roles. Each worker needs to know what he is supposed to be doing. That way they don't step on each other's toes. That way they both know what is expected of them. That way the elders know who to hold accountable for what. But if you want a great multi-preacher arrangement, make sure the workers are friends. If they are friends, the rest will work itself out.
- C. Frankly, the same is true for marriage. If you merely want a good marriage, then simply know your roles and fill them. If you want a great marriage, be friends. Isn't that how you started out? Isn't that a large part of why you got married to begin with? You had common interests, you spent time together, you liked each other, you enjoyed each other's company. Once you get married, you have a choice. You can keep that friendship alive by working at it or you can take it for granted and watch it die a slow, painful death.
- D. Allow me to give you two keys to help you keep the friendship alive or rekindle it if it has faded. Though I don't have a Bible verse that speaks of these two principles in the context of marriage, I take **Revelation 2:4-5**. As Jesus told the Ephesian church to return to the love it had at first, He counseled them to do the works they did at first. With that in mind, think about the two keys that kept you together until you got married.
 1. *Do stuff together*: would you have ever gotten married if you didn't do stuff together? Granted, in the days of arranged marriages this couldn't be said. But for us, the first step toward love and marriage was doing

stuff together. Whether in the form of dating or courting, whether chaperoned or not, we did stuff together. Sometimes it was spontaneous, because you just enjoyed one another's company so much. But a lot of the time it was scheduled. "Hey, do you want to go to the movies with me on Friday?" "Would you like to go to dinner with me on Saturday?" "Would you like to go to church with me on Sunday?" For some it might have been, "Do you want to go hunting with me on Saturday morning?" For others it might have been, "Hey, I'm going to the art museum on Thursday afternoon, want to come?" For even others it was, "Want to get coffee and hang out Monday night after work?" You hung out. You participated in recreational activities together. You supported each other in special events. You may have even worked together or had class together. Then, some of us got married and since we are living in the same house just kind of thought that was enough together time. You don't realize how little actual together time you are getting in a day full of two different jobs, carting the kids to school and soccer practice, pursuing separate hobbies, reading books, zoning out in front of the television, and falling asleep in the recliner. If you want to maintain your friendship or rekindle it, go back to what you did at first: do stuff together.

2. *Think the best of each other*: While some people are so good at putting their best foot forward during the dating process, when they get married it is like living with a completely different person, the reality is most of our flaws and foibles come out while we are preparing for marriage. The problem is not that our spouses hid their bad side, rather, we were so busy being in love we overlooked the bad side because we naturally thought the best of each other. I promise you, our spouses did not suddenly become different after the "I dos." We started looking at them differently. Before you were married, it was carefree spontaneity; afterwards, it becomes careless irresponsibility. Before you were married, it was goal-centered and driven; afterwards, it becomes being a jerk. Before you were married, it was being laid back; afterwards, it becomes being lazy. Before you were married, it was being careful and conscientious; afterwards, it becomes controlling. Everybody makes mistakes, even sins. But before you were married, you gave your significant other the benefit of the doubt and found the good in every flaw. After you were married, you began to doubt every benefit and to see the dark cloud behind every silver lining. If you want to maintain or rekindle your friendship, go back to what you did at first: think the best of each other.

E. Be one by being friends.

II. Be Partners

- A. Surely the whole metaphor of the wife as helper demonstrates partnership (cf. **Genesis 2:18**). As we learned in the first lesson of our series, God did not create wife because man was emotionally lonely. He created wife because he had a job to do and couldn't do the job if he was alone. He needed a helper, a partner. Regrettably, most men limit their ability to accomplish God's mission for their marriage because they don't pursue partnership with their wives, but rather dictatorship (which they often justify as a benevolent dictatorship, but that is an oxymoron).
- B. Being partners means working together. Working as one to accomplish the goals in your marriage, whether talking about God's main mission for your marriage, or the supporting goals you establish. Obviously, that first means agreeing on God's mission for your marriage. And then working together to determine what the subordinate and supporting goals of your marriage are. That means partnering in dealing with the finances, in making decisions (whether it be what is for lunch or which house to buy), and especially in parenting.
- C. Allow me to provide two keys to being partners.
 1. *Communication*: **Proverbs 16:21-24** gives a theme of communication. Wise people communicate wisely, with sweet speech, judicious speech, good sense, gracious words, and discernment. **Proverbs 31:26** says the excellent wife opens her mouth with wisdom, and kindness is on her tongue. Let these principles guide your marriage. We could obviously make an entire series of lessons on communicating properly. But you can't partner if you don't communicate. Communication involves speaking and listening. If you don't figure out a successful way to do both of those (and that may look very different for different marriages), you will never partner well.
 2. *Consensus*: As you communicate shoot for consensus. Consensus is not one partner having the control. Neither is it compromise, both giving up what they want and neither ever being satisfied. Consensus is coming to a joint agreement. This is the heart of behaving as a unit, behaving as one flesh. A marriage cannot possibly be claiming to act as one person when one or neither of them is enthusiastic or excited about the decisions being made. There are four basic steps to consensus building.
 - a) Both partners clearly communicate goals, desires, values, interests, and boundaries until each agrees that the other understands.

- b) Brainstorm with reckless abandon to find courses of action that will accomplish the goals, desires, values, interests, and boundaries of both partners.
- c) Except in emergency cases of imminent danger to someone, refuse to take action until you brainstorm an option that accomplishes the goals, desires, values, interests, and boundaries of both partners.
- d) Evaluate and choose the course of action that both can most enthusiastically support.

D. Be one by being partners.

III. Be Lovers

A. While “they shall become one flesh” of **Genesis 2:24** should not be reduced to physical intimacy, it cannot be divorced from it either. Paul connects the concept of becoming one flesh with the sex act itself in **I Corinthians 6:16**. The marriage bed is the celebration of the one flesh they are becoming. And a couple cannot claim to be fully one flesh while this part of their relationship is on the rocks.

B. Sadly, we rarely get to hear the positive side of physical intimacy between a husband and wife. Usually we only talk about it when we are discussing immorality or when it is seen as just a vehicle for procreation. Because of that, many of us have an underlying view that while necessary to meet needs and have children, there is really something wrong with sexual intimacy even between a husband and wife. But then we come to **Song of Solomon** which shatters those ideas. I love the statement by Duane A. Garrett in his commentary on the **Song of Solomon**, “The Song [of Solomon] presents sexuality as a good thing protected by marriage and not as an evil thing made permissible by marriage.”¹ God has given us the “act of marriage” as one author calls it, as a gift because He wants to let us experience pleasure, fun, excitement, intimacy, connection, love. Nothing else connects a husband and wife together in intimacy the way the bedroom does. Spend some time reading **Song of Solomon** to see two people who understand the blessing this gift is. They could talk about it. They enjoyed it. They longed for it. They missed it when separated from each other. They couldn’t wait to come back together in sexual union.

C. Allow me to provide three keys to being lovers.

1. *Check your shame at the altar:* In **Genesis 2:25**, Moses wrote, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (ESV). While we should be ashamed of immorality (cf. **Ephesians 5:12**), it was never God’s plan for our teaching on modesty to make husbands and wives ashamed in the marriage bedroom. As **Hebrews 13:4** says marriage is honorable and the marriage bed is undefiled. Shame in the marriage bed is not caused by holiness, it is caused by sin and a fallen world. **Genesis 2:25** should still apply to husbands and wives in their own private chambers.
2. *Learn to communicate about intimacy with your spouse:* A lot of couples fight about this aspect of their relationship. Many joke about it. Few can communicate about it in a healthy way. Again, **Song of Solomon** is staring us in the face. Here was a couple willing to communicate about their romantic and physical love for one another. The fact is many of the problems married couples face with this aspect of their relationship aren’t so much about this aspect of the relationship but about their inability to communicate about it. There are a lot of aspects of this which I would love to share but are more appropriate in a private setting. However, one specific advice for communication that I think is essential is to come up with a mutually agreed upon way to request intimacy, a mutually agreed upon way to acknowledge the request and accept it, and a mutually agreed upon way to refuse it that will keep the other partner from feeling rejected.
3. *Prioritize the marriage bed:* If you are not careful, parenting responsibilities, work responsibilities, educational responsibilities, congregational responsibilities, sickness, stress, and just plain old daily distractions will leave you so tired and exhausted that one or both of you lets being lovers slide to the back burner. An ongoing intimate relationship that is fulfilling to both partners takes work and time. There is a lot working against a couple on this point. Sadly, because of the movies, many have the idea that this part of the relationship is working properly when it is happening spontaneously. The idea of purposefully prioritizing, even scheduling it will take the fun right out of it. Please think about a lot of the other fun activities you participate in it. Does the fact that some of you schedule to play ultimate Frisbee every Sunday night take the fun out of it? Does the fact that some of you schedule your monthly book club meetings take the fun out of it? Does the fact that you schedule card clubs, bowling leagues, concerts, and vacations make them no fun?

D. Be one by being lovers.

IV. Be Peacemakers

¹ Garrett, Duane A., *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Broadman Press, Nashville, 1993, p 378.

- A. No matter how hard you work at being friends, being partners, and being lovers, Satan is going to weasel his way in on occasions and distract you from your oneness. Whether it is mere annoyance regarding personal preferences or outright sin, Satan is going to drive a wedge between you. There is only one thing that will help with this. Be a peacemaker (**Matthew 5:9**). Learn how to reconcile.
- B. There are two keys to marital peacemaking.
1. *Apologize*: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your [spouse] has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your [spouse] and then come and offer your gift” (**Matthew 5:23-24**, ESV). Be honest. When you have done wrong, admit it, confess it, apologize for it, seek forgiveness. We don’t have time to unpack them in this survey lesson, but consider the following 7 A’s of an Apology from Ken Sande’s The Peacemaker.²
 - a) *Address everyone involved*: If this affected your children, include them in the apology.
 - b) *Avoid “if,” “but,” and “maybe”*: That is, don’t say, “If I upset you, I’m sorry.” Or “I know I did such and such, but…” Or “Maybe I could have done differently.” Or “Perhaps you have a point about that.” These are hedge words that allow you to technically apologize without apologizing at all.
 - c) *Admit specifically*: Avoid generalities. Talk about actual events and behaviors.
 - d) *Acknowledge the hurt*: Demonstrate that you understand why this behavior was upsetting or painful to your spouse.
 - e) *Accept the consequences*: When the apologizer acts like the apology just wipes out the infraction and then complains about the consequences, it nullifies the force of the apology. Apologizing means realizing you did wrong and you deserve consequences. Your spouse may forgive you and altar the consequences, but the responsibility for that reaction is between your spouse and God, not something for you to demand.
 - f) *Alter your behavior*: Does this even need explanation?
 - g) *Ask for forgiveness*: Do not miss this important part. So often we think “I’m sorry” should cover it. No. Actually ask for forgiveness. And remember when you are asking for that, you are asking for something you don’t deserve. Further, you are asking for something your spouse is not obligated to you to give. Your spouse may have an obligation to God, and someone may need to demand that response from your spouse, but not you. You are asking for mercy. And if your spouse honestly claims inability to forgive you at the moment, simply explain that you understand and hope your spouse can come to the point of forgiving you at some time.
 2. *Forgive*: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (**Ephesians 4:32**, ESV). “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (**Matthew 6:12**, ESV). Forgiveness is the glue that makes it work. Forgiveness means wiping the slate clean. It means not holding grudges. It means accepting the cost of the wrong and being willing to pay it yourself instead of waiting until the perpetrator can pay it or demanding they pay it. Because we are sinners, and because we will sin in marriage, there can be no oneness if we do not learn to forgive. When you promise to forgive your spouse as God forgives you, you are making five promises as seen in **Psalms 103:8-14**.³ If you cannot make these promises, do not claim you are forgiving your spouse. Claim you will pray for strength and growth to be able to forgive. Then work on it.
 - a) Promise #1: I will not dwell on this incident.
 - b) Promise #2: I will not bring this incident up again to use it against you.
 - c) Promise #3: I will not talk to others about this incident.
 - d) Promise #4: I will not punish you over this incident.
 - e) Promise #5: I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.
- C. Be one by being peacemakers.

Conclusion:

Why should you pursue these things in marriage? Because it will make you happy? Because it will bring you peace? Because it will provide fulfillment and meaning? Because it will make you comfortable? No. Certainly all these things are likely serendipitous by-products of becoming one flesh in marriage. But that is not why you should be one. Rather, we are to pursue oneness because that is how our marriages will truly represent Christ and His church to the world. Remember, we are supposed to be conducting our marriages in such a way that when folks in the world

² Sande, Ken, The Peacemaker, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 2004, pp. 126-134. Sande calls this the “Seven A’s of Confession”

³ These promises come from the sermon “The Gift of Full Forgiveness” preached by Edwin Crozier for the Christians who meet on Livingston Avenue on March 28, 2015. It can be found at the following URL: <http://www.christiansmeethere.org/sermons/sermons/2015/03/29/the-gift-of-full-forgiveness>. Some of the wording is based on Ken Sande’s “Four Promises of Forgiveness” found on p. 209 of The Peacemaker.

see them they might say, "If that is what it is like to be in the church's relationship with Jesus Christ, I want in." The standard operating procedure to make that happen is becoming one. So be friends, be partners, be lovers, and be peacemakers.

I don't want to end with simply a generic challenge to be one. Or with a generic challenge to go have better marriages. Did we need an hour long sermon to tell us to have better marriages? Of course not. I want to challenge your marriages to have a series of fun conversations each day this week. They don't have to be long and drawn out. Read the questions ahead of time. Be prepared to answer when the time comes. They are designed to help you remember your oneness, your friendship, and your partnership. These conversations are all about remembering when, how, and why you got married. They are helping your spouse remember why they married you and what is great about you (and vice versa) I'm not asking for a public show of commitment tonight, though of course, if you want to make the commitment publically by coming forward, feel free to do so. But please be committed.

A Series of Conversations for Couples:

My hope is the following conversations will be a fun one. Please keep it positive. I am aware that if your marriage is on the rocks, it is easy to look back through your history together and only see the negative. In this conversation we want to remind each other of the positives. Each of you ask the following questions of your spouse.

Monday: Why were you initially attracted to me? Why did you initially want to pursue a relationship with me?

Tuesday: List three positive character traits of mine that you admire, respect, love?

Wednesday: What were three fun non-sexual things we did together while we were dating or the first year we were married?

Thursday: Why did you ask me to marry you? Why did you say yes when I asked you to marry me?

Friday: List five positive memories of our relationship together that you remember with fondness and gladness.