

Building Up Our Home Series---#5

Building Strong Marriages



- 1. Through A Commitment to Each Other**
- 2. By Developing A Close and Meaningful Relationship**
- 3. By A Continuous Communication**
- 4. By Unconditional Acceptance**
- 5. By Controlled Emotions**
- 6. By a Strong Spiritual Life**

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Lesson One

"Through a Commitment to Each Other"

When you talk about Loyalty & Commitment—Ruth is a prime example of such. (Ruth 1:15-17). She was willing to leave her family & homeland to go and live among strange people with different customs & beliefs and be committed to Naomi—to her people and to her God. Commitment is an important principle in every area of life! The automobile manufacturers say they are *"committed to excellence."* Professional athletes are committed to be the very best they can be. People can be committed to their job, their company, and their community. They can even be committed to the Lord & His church. We are convinced that commitment is foundational to a successful Christian life. If it is important as a Christian—**It must be in marriage!**

To some, Commitment is a trap, suffocating to the one that wants to get out. To others it can be like being in bondage to something that is failing.

Yet—there is nothing more important in marriage than a determination that it should last. In a survey of 186 couples:

- a) Commitment was one of the top 3 things listed that make for strong & lasting marriages.
- b) *"A commitment to stay married settles it and allows no other choice."*
- c) It means that Divorce is out of the question.

In this lesson we will be stressing that Strong Marriages require commitment.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE COMMITMENT?

The word can be defined in various ways: *"To bring together," "To join together," "To entrust one's self to someone or something," "To put one's self in another's hands," "To pledge one's self to another" "To promise to do something and keep it."* Ruth illustrates this concept when she made a promise to Naomi and kept it. In the same way God is committed to His promises. ***"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."*** (Heb. 10:23). Also, Jesus committed Himself to the will of God. ***"Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously."*** (1 Pet. 2:23). Timothy was told to "commit" or "entrust" the Word of God to others. ***"And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."*** (2 Tim. 2:2). Men can, unfortunately, commit their ways to sinfulness. ***"Jesus answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.'"*** (John 8:34). Commitment is to promise or pledge ourselves to

another—whether it is to one's mate or to God. We are encouraged to commit our ways to the Lord (Ps. 37:5), and also those who suffer as a Christian to a faithful Creator. This same concept is a MUST for marriages to be strong!

COMMITMENT TO WHAT?

1. To the Concept of Marriage! A question is being asked: *"Should people marry or not?"* Even though some are questioning such—most still do get married. Some of those who question the concept of marriage will advocate cohabitation. When they get tired of that arrangement—they break it off and get another. There is no real commitment to marriage. Have you seen the bumper sticker—*"The major cause of divorce is marriage!"* True—if there is no marriage, there can be no divorce. But such is a sad commentary on man's ignorance and disregard of God's Word on the subject.

God instituted the concept of marriage. He created both a male and a female. He brought them together as husband and wife in marriage. Adam seems to have understood: *"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."* (Gen. 2:24). God designed that marriage should be for life. *"For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives."* (Rom. 7:2). It is therefore up to mankind to be committed to God's arrangement. Survival of the concept of Marriage depends upon such a commitment.

2. To Each Other! One can be committed to the concept of marriage, but not necessarily to their mate. *"Yes, I believe in marriage, but I want to divorce this mate and marry another."* And this is what has been happening for centuries. The problem—Lack of commitment to one another. A couple can even be committed to keeping the marriage together but become alienated from each other. For a strong, successful marriage, they need to be committed to each other as well. The vows made at the time of the ceremony stresses this: *"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death us do part..."* These vows are in regards to each other—a love and concern for each other.

A photographer was asked to make a duplicate picture of a boy's girl friend. He noticed this inscription on the back: *"My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." Signed, "Dianne." "P.S.—If we ever break up, I want this picture back." That is commitment?*

A President of a Bible College was faced with a momentous decision. His wife had contacted Alzheimer's disease. It had gotten so bad that he could no longer

continue as President if he took care of his wife. His closest friends advised him to put her in an institution to be cared for. Then, he could continue on in his work....and besides, he was only 57 years old. But he made the decision to resign his job and spend his time caring for his wife. He had committed himself to her 42 years ago—*"in sickness and in health—to love, honor and cherish."* It was a matter of integrity with him. He later wrote of the joys and blessings he had received as a result of the special time spent with his wife.

THE VALUE OF COMMITMENT

The true story above has already helped to emphasize some of the value in being committed, not only to marriage; but more so, to one another! The following thoughts are just a few of the things that can be a blessing in a marriage of commitment!

1. It puts away selfishness! A committed marriage doesn't just last as long as things are going well. It is not just holding on until someone better comes along. It is to show concern for each other's happiness—to love and cherish one another! (Eph. 5:21-33). It is to show my concern for what my mate thinks, their values, their goals, and their dreams. It is to say to them: *"Your life makes a difference to me and others!"* It is to invest unconditionally in the well-being of the other person.

2. It shows our integrity! Commitment is more than being bull-headed about keeping a marriage together. It is a sacred promise to a mate—before God and others. It is to hate what God hates (divorce)—knowing the terrible consequences of such. It is to hold steady when the temptation is to run from a difficult situation or relationship. It gives staying power to preserve a needed relationship.

3. It can bring joy, satisfaction, happiness, and contentment. (1 Cor. 7:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7, etc.). Marriage has definitely been designed for the continuity of man, but for his happiness and contentment.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This commitment makes some strong demands upon the two who are married.

1. It demands Trustworthiness! Lack of trust is learned by children. Adults also learn not to trust the untrustworthy! "Unfaithfulness" on the part of a mate is devastating because it destroys the trust that has been built between them.

2. It demands Endurance! Not just to stay married, but to help one another to make the marriage richer, happier, etc.

3. It demands Self-Development! We are challenged not to let the marriage become stale and boring, but keep ourselves attractive outwardly and inwardly (1 Pet. 3:1-3), and to be desirable company (a joy to be with). We should not just get old—but to continue to grow (2 Cor. 4:16).

4. It demands a Choice! It was not something forced on us, but one we freely make. It is a commitment we chose to make at the beginning of marriage, and should be a choice every day of our lives. There is no "P.S." to marriage!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Ruth (book of Judges) illustrate commitment?
2. What are some other examples you know of?
3. Why do some feel marriage is a trap that suffocates them?
4. Give a good definition of "commitment."
5. Why is it important for God to carry out His promises?
6. What does it mean to commit one's self to sin?
7. What is the difference between being committed to the idea of marriage and being committed to a mate?
8. What would you say about this remark: *"The major cause of Divorce is marriage?"*
9. How does commitment deal with selfishness?
10. What is integrity?

Lesson Two

"By Developing a Close and Meaningful Relationship"

A research group analyzed marriages and put them into seven different kinds of relationships:

- 1) Devitalized marriages—Much unhappiness.
- 2) Financially-focused marriages—Their only good thing about their marriage.
- 3) Conflicted marriages—Some satisfaction, but more dissatisfaction.
- 4) Traditional marriages—Some sources of dissatisfaction, but the religious element and extended family helped to stabilize the marriage.
- 5) Balanced marriages—Some good and some bad, but an over-all positive marriage.
- 6) Harmonious marriages—High satisfaction—but few areas of difficulty.
- 7) Vitalized marriages—High degree of satisfaction with marriage.

This research group also tried to analyze the reasons for the decline in marital relationships. Below are the four main indicators:

- 1) Unrealistic expectations of a mate.
- 2) Manipulation of a mate—trying to make a spouse conform to one's expectations—to force a change.
- 3) Hostility between couple—indicating continued disappointment that leads to arguing, accusing, yelling, and make terrible statements to each other.
- 4) Hopelessness—resistance to change—despair—divorce is their only escape from a very undesirable relationship.

One of the obvious things that the above indicates is that humans need not only relationships, but close relationships. We not only need them to survive, but also to enable one to live life to its fullest. Thus, when marriages do not supply a meaningful, close relationship—they are in trouble! In this lesson, we want to suggest some things that will help to build close and meaningful relationships in a marriage.

1. Put marriage partner first! (Gen. 2:24). During dating, two people seek to get to know one another—their interests, goals, values, and thoughts. They are either drawn to one another or decide to part company. After marriage, other factors demand our time and attention—careers, general activities, children, etc. Familiarity with one another causes us to take each other for granted. The end

result—we drift apart and the relationship is less meaningful and satisfying. It is necessary to put our mate first before all others (after God—Matt. 6:33). Our mate needs to know they he/she is still desired and needed.

2. Please our mate! (Eph. 5:28-29). We need to emotionally feed, encourage, and help to create a healthy outlook in our relationship. It is an effort to help make our mate to feel special and secure. A bad marriage is where two lonely people desperately need to be loved, cared for, and cherished. (1 Cor. 7:3-5). Selfishness indicates that a person is self-centered—having a desire to only please self and not concerned about others. Of all people, we should strive to please our mates in marriage.

3. Give praise! (Phil. 4:8). Everyone needs to be praised and shown approval. We all need and deserve to hear genuine, sincere expressions of appreciation. A farmer's wife fed her husband "cattle feed" for his lunch. He was irate over her actions. Her comment to him was: *"In 30 years I have never heard anything from you that would cause me to think you could tell the difference."* (Rom. 12:10; 13:7). We need to look for ways to give honor, praise to others—especially our mates.

4. Build common interest! (Gen. 2:24). God's emphasis is on the two becoming one. Strong and close relationships are built on what the two shares in common. And, of course, a strong spiritual interest is one of the greatest bonds to share. And...there are other obvious areas of sharing that can and should be done. An obvious danger signal to a deteriorating marriage is when the two are never together doing things. We need to work towards being of one heart and soul (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32).

5. Accept responsibility! (Matt. 13:13-17). We need to open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts to our mate. We need to stop blaming the other and accept our own responsibility for the problems we may be having. Healing of a bad relationship can only come by owning up to our responsibility. And...in order to improve relationships, there may have to be some changes made. For each mate to expect the other to make changes (but I do not need to)—can end in disaster. In reality, the problem is not really in my mate, but it is in how "I" react to my mate! My mate's change is not my responsibility, but my change is! The solution is not a new partner, but switching to my being a new person (Rom. 6:3-5).

6. I must deal with stubbornness! (Acts 7:51). Stubbornness can destroy a good marriage as illustrated in the following story. *A captain of a battleship was trying to pilot his ship in dangerous waters in a heavy fog. He was straining to see any dangers ahead. His worst fears were realized when he saw a light up in front of him. He slowed down and spoke over his loud speaker to what he thought was another ship—"Turn 10 degrees South!" The answer came back—*

"You turn 10 degrees North!" *The captain was frantic and called again—"Turn 10 degrees South!" And the answer from the light came back just as strong—"No, you turn 10 degrees North!" Angrily, the captain shouted—"I am a battleship, turn 10 degrees South!" The response came back—"I am a lighthouse, turn 10 degrees North!"* When differences and disagreements come, someone has to make a move to change course. Both cannot stubbornly stand ground and insist on their way. For sure, they are heading for a crash.

7. Count the cost! (Luke 14:28-33). We need to sincerely take time to sit down and realize "*What is the alternative if we do not do these things?*" It may be that we may have to live with a dead relationship for years to come that eventually may end in a legal separation or divorce. Such options are costly—financially, emotionally, and spiritually. And what guarantee do you have that you can find another mate who will agree to marry you? And then, an obvious truth needs to be seen—I am still the same person that I was! Can I learn to live with another person again?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Close and meaningful relationships in marriage are greatly enhanced by the above factors. Study them carefully and work to put them into action as soon as possible—and watch for the results!

Marriage is designed to fill many basic needs that God built into people:

1. The desire to have someone close to them (Gen. 2:18).
2. The need to be understood—someone cares (Jas. 1:19).
3. The need for emotional and physical affection (Jas. 5:20; 1 Jn. 3:11).

And the list can go on and on. God has designed us and has provided for our happiness here and hereafter—if only we will listen to what He has to say!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is your evaluation of the 7 kinds of marital relationships?

2. What do you consider to be a major cause of declining marital relations?

3. What are some ways of putting my mate first?

4. Why does praise of one's mate need to be genuine?

5. What has to be overcome if we have a lot of common interest?

6. Who should be taking the lead in helping to overcome bad relationships in marriage?

7. What is a basic fault of stubbornness?

8. Why would a person allow bad relationships to come in their marriage?

9. What are some basic human needs that a proper marriage helps to satisfy?

Lesson Three

"Continuous Communication"

Strong relationships in marriages do not happen by accident—they must be worked at! The differences between men and women are obvious and you do not overcome these differences without effort. Continuous communication is a necessity to help make for a strong marriage and we hope to indicate why it is so important in this lesson.

But first, we want to look at the concept of communication. It is simply defined as: *"Expressing of one's thoughts, feelings and desires to another."* But it is more than this! *"It is to do so without intimidating or putting the other person on the defensive."* And also, *"It is an exchange of ideas and opinions in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding."* So, when men and women have different views of what is communicating, a marriage runs into trouble. **Women** generally like to: *"Share themselves—their life's dreams, aspirations, joys and problems as a way of arriving at companionship."* They also: *"Look upon marriage as two intimates who share their utmost secrets."* But **men**, approach communicating as: *"Problem-solving, making choices, giving advice or discussing plans."* They also: *"Look upon marriage as being two roommates who never talk about deep stuff."* If the above quotes are anywhere close to being true, you can see why communicating can be a problem in a marriage. The problem involves not only the ability to talk to each other, but as well what they will talk about.

Also, we need to understand that communicating is more than talking—it is the ability to be understood. Communication involves the ability to listen well and understand what is said. To illustrate: A woman went to a Lawyer to get a divorce. The Lawyer wanted to know, *"Do you have grounds?"* *"Yes, about five acres."* *"No, no, I mean, do you have a grudge?"* *"No, just a carport."* The Lawyer asked: *"Does he beat you up?"* *"No, I get up before he does."* Exasperated, the attorney demanded: *"Madam, why do you want a divorce from your husband?"* *"Because it is impossible to communicate with that man!"*

***PROPER TALK
IMPROVES COMMUNICATIONS***

Let's look first at improper talk. The word of God has some thoughts on such: ***Prov. 27:15-16***—*"A continual dripping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike; whoever restrains her restrains the wind, and grasps oil with his right hand."* A continual nagging or a contentious attitude does not improve communication on the part of either one!

Eph. 4:32—*"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."* No marriage can succeed unless there is a lot of kindness shown and a lot of forgiving extended! Harsh and unkind talk does not improve communications. Talk that is kind and tenderhearted stands a much better chance.

Eph. 4:29—*"Let no corrupt words proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers."* False statements or accusations do not improve communication. Neither does foul language either.

Prov. 17:28—*"Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive."* We often receive unwanted advice, rather than understanding. There are times when advice is out of place and not desired!

Proper talk will improve communications—even when we speak the truth... *"in love!"* (Eph. 4:15). God commands us to speak truth, not a lie! But we need to speak it in a way that we show true and genuine concern for the person to whom we are talking. Even the way we phrase things can make a difference in how it is received. For example: *"This is what I think"* rather than *"You did this or that."* It is better to express our feelings without imputing wrong motives to others. *"Love does not behave itself unseemly..."* (1 Cor. 13:5). It is not rude, unmannerly, or indecent. It is courteous, kind, and thoughtful of others. Love even lets the other person finish their thoughts and not rudely interrupt him.

Well chosen words can make a difference in communicating to others. *"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness."* (Prov. 15:1-2). Or, *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver."* (Prov. 25:11). How we try to communicate to another reveals our regard or respect for that person. *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interest, but also for the interests of others."* We need to indicate a positive, high regard for the other person—letting him know that *"I prize you, I value you."* One way that makes this easier and genuine is to focus on their strong points, not on their weaknesses or the negative and express appreciation for the good things (Phil. 1:10).

PROPER LISTENING IMPROVES COMMUNICATIONS

We believe that improper listening has possibly caused as much of the problems that we have as any other one thing. The wise man stated it very well: *"He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him."* To not give the person time to finish their thoughts is improper and unkind.

Such people want to talk too much. They think too highly of their own ideas. This is what could be called prejudiced hearing (Matt. 13:13-16). The best speaker in the world doesn't get through to them. They filter out everything they do not want to hear.

Proper hearing will definitely improve communications. Again the wise man of Proverbs speaks on the subject: ***"Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him."*** (Prov. 29:20). James expressed it this way: ***"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."*** (James 1:19). It is important that we do not try to control or pre-judge a person before we hear all the facts (Matt. 7:1-2). We need to be slow to give a rebuke, rebuttal, a criticism, or ridicule. We need to be forgiving listeners. It is important that we prayerfully listen—we show real concern for what the other person has to say. We also show that we value what he says by carefully listening to his thoughts (James 5:16).

It is also very important that we watch our body language as we listen. It is suggested that we communicate in three ways:

- a) By words (7%).
- b) By the tone of our voice (38%).
- c) By our over-all body (55%).

We can communicate one thing with our body or actions and quite another by our words. It is important that our words, tone of voice, and body language all agree! (1 Cor. 13:3). Of course, our body language indicates whether we are listening well or not. We need to cease being so occupied with ourselves and be concerned about others (Phil. 2:4). We need to listen in order to help and to understand.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Marriages are made and/or kept strong by proper communications that involves:

- a) Learning how to effectively express ourselves to others;
- b) Learning how to listen effectively as others express themselves.

We need to encourage good communication by being swift to hear and slow to speak and definitely slow to wrath. How we act towards our fellow-man is often the way we act towards God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does the differences of men and women affect communications?
2. Give a simple definition of communications.
3. Do you agree with the statement: "*Communication is more than talking?*"
4. What is meant by "proper talk?"
5. Why is forgiveness so important to communications?
6. What does a soft answer do in contrast to hard words?
7. What role does selfish ambition or conceit play in communications?
8. What is a fitly word spoken compared unto?
9. Why should we listen before answering a person?
10. A person who wants to talk too much reveals what about himself?
11. Why is body language so important in communicating?

Lesson Four

"Unconditional Acceptance"

When we marry we know that the other person is not perfect, but don't we wish they were! But we sort of accept the fact of their imperfection and feel that we can help to change them over a period of time. Marriage is often built on unrealistic idealism. We start with high expectations; but then, it becomes all too obvious that it just isn't that way. It is then, unfortunately, start a down hill slide. In order to build on a good and stable foundation, I must first be able to face reality and to accept my mate as he or she is—not what I have imagined them to be.

WHAT IS ACCEPTANCE?

Our general acceptance of people often is based on a list of "Do's" and "Don'ts" that a person must conform to in order to be accepted. Or, *"Do right, and I will accept you!" "Do wrong, and I will reject you!"* **Unconditional acceptance** of people is to accept a person where they are and who they are. This does not condone that which may be wrong in their lives; but rather, it is accepting them where they are as a person. It is not pretending that everything is terrific or that there are no weaknesses or flaws that exist. The ability to accept others unconditionally may depend to a great extent on how we accept ourselves. Can we do this? *"Can I look at my life, my self, my mate, my work, etc., and say: 'No, my life is not perfect in all areas, but I can live with it. I can accept things as they are right now. I'll keep on growing and hope for changes for the better, but I can live with life as it is now.'"* It is important that we stop trying to force changes in each other.

The inspired statement by the Apostle would seem to be important here in our discussion: **"I have learned to be content!"** (Phil. 4:11). The excuse that we often make for trying to change each other is—*"It's what is best for them!"* But, in reality, what may be best for them is:

1. Let them be themselves...back off!
2. Give our non-judgmental acceptance!
3. Allow the person freedom to act!

What does the Scripture indicate about acceptance? Jesus offered friendship to us upon the basis of our willingness to listen to His teachings and follow them (John 15:14). He didn't say: *"When you have put away all your wrongs, then I'll accept you!"* He accepts us even though we have sinned and been in rebellion to the will of God. But that acceptance is still dependant upon our willingness to ***"die to self and live unto God!"*** We need to be willing to turn around and

begin changing our lives for the better; but it is Jesus' willingness to accept us that motivates us to want to make those changes. When we feel accepted, then we have room to grow and change for the better. In Paul's letter to the Romans he states: **"Therefore receive one another (accept), just as Christ also received us (received), to the glory of God."** (15:7). It is important that we stop being so judgmental and accept people where they are so they can grow.....**Give them Time!**

The inspired James condemned those to whom he was writing when they based their acceptance on people according to their dress. They were showing "respect of persons," which is another way of saying "judgmental non-acceptance." James also calls it sin (James 2:1-9). His admonition was: *"Don't show favoritism—accept one another in the proper way."*

ACCEPTANCE OF SELF

There are two Scriptures, in particular, that emphasize the importance of accepting ourselves:

1. **Matt. 22:39**—*"And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—which means that love of self needs to be there before we can properly love our neighbor. Love of self becomes the example we are to follow in showing love to our neighbor. But what if a person does not really love himself? What if he is unwilling to accept himself? Then, what? This statement by Jesus would seem to indicate that a sane and rational person does love himself—that he does accept himself.*
2. **Eph. 5:28-29**—*"So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."* Again, it is strongly insinuated that a person who does not love himself would be incapable of properly loving others. A person who does not love himself—who neglects and destroys himself—would find it very hard to love his wife.

Self-love or self-acceptance is neither to be inferior or superior. We love and accept ourselves "in spite of" who we are. I accept myself for who I am. My self-worth or self-esteem depends upon my acceptance of self for who I am—not what I am not!

STRONG MARRIAGES COMES FROM ACCEPTANCE

How do we accept one another? How do we show it? How will my mate know that I accept them?

1. It is when I give up my constant effort to change my mate and show a willingness to accept them as they are that a strong marriage can be built. After all, it is differences that make life interesting! We need to be able to laugh at strange behavior and unique ways. And....I cannot change my mate anyway. He or she must do that themselves, if it is done! Trying to force it only makes things worse!

2. I need to accept my mate's limitations. We all have limitations (Rom. 3: 10, 23). Some of us have more than others possibly, but we all have them. We need to try **not** to focus on people's limitations (which may not be easy), but rather focus on their strengths (Phil. 4:8). If we want to be accepting of our mates, we need to look strongly at the positive things about them.

3. I do not let other's actions control my thinking or actions. When my mate does something I do not like, it is easy to give in to the action and let it affect my outlook towards her. I should be accepting of her in spite of her actions. Jesus made this very clear when he said: *"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."* (Matt. 5:44). I must not let even my enemy to control my thinking and actions, much less my mate!

4. Be grateful for the mate that I have. Stop looking for "greener pastures." Be grateful that I have someone who loves me and will live with me. Since no one is perfect, another mate is not the solution. The Apostle's admonition in Phil. 4:6 is: *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God..."* An unthankful person is hard to live with!

5. Be understanding and forgiving. (Eph. 4:32). Try to understand "why" people do what they do! But most of all, be willing to forgive their mistakes. At the same time we need to realize that we also need understanding and forgiveness. I need acceptance for whom I am, not what I ought to be.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Strong marriages "march to a different tune" than the average marriage. It is not: *"If you don't measure up, I will reject you."* But rather, *"I will accept you who you are and where you are."* One of the greatest blessings you can give anyone is **ACCEPTANCE!** Jesus' acceptance of sinners has changed the lives of so many on this earth. We were sinners, unworthy of His love; but, he loved us, died for us, and wants to save us. Such acceptance causes us to want to be the very best we can be—to show our gratitude for His "unconditional" acceptance! Why wouldn't the same thing be true with such an acceptance of a mate?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do people go into marriage with unrealistic expectations?

2. Does "unconditional" acceptance of a mate condone that which is wrong in their lives?

3. Why is "self-love" or "self-acceptance" so important in building a strong marriage?

4. Does Jesus accept us as His friends if we keep on doing evil? (Jn. 15:14).

5. In what sense does Jesus accept sinners "unconditionally?"

6. What does the Apostle Paul say about accepting one another and why?

7. Is being a "respector of persons" the same as being "judgmental non-acceptance?"

8. Can one love his neighbor if he does not love himself?

9. Can a person be "accepting" of an enemy?

10. What part does thankfulness and forgiveness play in "acceptance?"

Lesson Five

"Controlled Emotions"

Self-control must characterize the Christian! (2 Pet. 1:5-11). If we do not control or bridle our tongue, our religion is vain (Jas. 1:26). If we can bring our tongue into control, we are a mature person (Jas. 3:2). The Greek word "Krates" carries with it the concept of strength of will as the Apostle Paul expressed in 1 Cor. 9:27—*"But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."* It should be obvious that strong marriages come from people who are in control of themselves so they can do and say the right things at the right time and place.

- a) They are in control of their speech (Jas. 1:26).
- b) They are in control of their emotions (Eph. 4:31).
- c) They are in control of their actions (Eph. 4:22-24).
- d) They are in control of those things that are destructive to close human relationships (Phil. 2:1-5; Rom. 12:9-14).

And it is obvious that one of the most destructive emotions of man is anger!

ANGER MUST BE CONTROLLED

The Scriptures have much to say about anger and the need to bring such into subjection to the Will of God. We are admonished to cease from anger and forsake wrath (Ps. 37:8). The person that is slow to anger is better than the mighty...as well as the person who can rule his spirit is greater than the man who takes a city (Prov. 16:32). We are to rid our lives of the kind of anger that is selfish and that prompts us to destroy, to hurt, and to give pain to others (Eph. 4:26-27, 31). Husbands are not to let their anger prompt them to bitterness towards their wives (Col. 3:19).

Anger can be expressed in various forms—see the following:

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1) Bitterness | 6) Intolerance | 11) Seditious |
| 2) Malice | 7) Criticism | 12) Jealousy |
| 3) Clamor | 8) Revenge | 13) Attack |
| 4) Envy | 9) Wrath | 14) Gossip |
| 5) Resentment | 10) Hatred | 15) Sarcasm |
| | | 16) Unforgiveness |

Anger needs to be brought under control because of the hurt it can do to others.

- 1) It can cause harm to mankind in general.
- 2) It can harm an otherwise good marriage.
- 3) It can do untold damage in our homes—affecting all in it.
- 4) It can result in physical damage to individuals that the anger is expressed towards.

- 5) It can bring physical problems to the one who harbors anger.
- 6) It can destroy our soul.

When one stops to evaluate all the evil that has come out of hatred, we can easily see why God wants anger to be put out of our lives and/or at least brought under control.

- 1) It has brought on many wars and conflicts among peoples.
- 2) It has brought ruin to many nations of people.
- 3) Wives have been battered.
- 4) Children have been abused.
- 5) Children are alienated from their family.
- 6) Caused a lot of emotionally scarred persons.
- 7) Continued anger brings on physical illnesses.
- 8) There is no telling how much damage it has been to the church.
- 9) It has caused family relations to be so badly damaged that they can't be mended.
- 10) It can end in murder (Cain).

CONTROLLING ANGER IN MARRIAGE

There are different factors that can help motivate us to control our anger. One of those factors is a recognition that **anger can be sin** in many instances. The desire to do harm, hurt, or give pain to another is wrong. Such is condemned by God (Col. 3:19). As a sin, it must be faced, confessed, and put away (1 John 1:9). We need to ask God's forgiveness and His wisdom and strength to deal with anger in our lives. **Forgiveness** is another motivation that can cause us to want to control our anger. We not only need God's forgiveness, but we need to forgive the person who may have provoked my anger (Eph. 4:31-32). **Love** also helps us to deal with anger (Prov. 10:12). 1 Cor. 13 tells us what love does:

- v. 4—It suffers long and is kind.
- v. 5—It does not behave itself unseemly.
- v. 6—It is not easily provoked.
- v. 7—It bears all things and endures all things.

God's love in our hearts and lives can help us deal with this terrible problem. **Divine or Heavenly wisdom** can help us to deal with anger (Jas. 3:16-17). It is peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, and full of mercy. We need to diligently seek after this wisdom. **Patience** can help us to deal with anger (Luke 21:19). Self-control comes through learning to be patient. Patience is dealing with others—as well as ourselves.

Controlling anger is one of the factors that help us to control our actions towards others. Correct or righteous actions are simply doing that which is just, fair, and right in the sight of God (and possibly most men). God is perfectly correct or righteous in all His actions. His Law is perfectly correct or righteous in all that it requires. Thus, when we are like God or obey His Law,

We are doing correct acts. *"Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous."* (1 Jn. 3:7). Right or correct actions come also because we control what takes place in our hearts towards other people (Matt. 15:18-19). Correct thinking that leads to correct actions comes from one who allows God's truth to dwell in him, control him, and guide him. Strong marriages come from husbands and wives that strive to be righteous both in their heart and in their life.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Destructive emotions must be brought under the control of God in our lives. But strong marriages do not just happen; they are made by God and man working together. God has furnished the instructions and the incentives or motivations; but, man must recognize his part, his responsibility, in helping to bring about strong marriages. Emotions must be controlled and right actions must be the consistent practice one towards another.

Four important concepts are involved in this process of having the right attitudes and actions:

1. Submission to one another (Eph. 5:21). Jesus submitted to man's needs and in that sense submitted to us. He humbled himself to do this (Phil. 2:5-8). Mutual submission is illustrated in all areas of life.
2. By having a Servant Attitude (Eph. 5:22-29; Jn. 13:1-17). Jesus showed this when He washed His disciples feet. A servant attitude will end the battle over who is the greatest.
3. By Valuing one another (Eph. 5:30-31). God emphasized that the two were to become one—both are valuable one to the other. Each can help the other to be better.
4. By showing proper respect for one another (Eph. 5:33). It is often the little things that make the big difference in husband-wife relationships. When we interrupt, badger, put down, ignore, or condemn our mates, we show a lack of respect for them.

Strong marriages come from controlled emotions and result in right actions one towards another. What makes me a better Christian also makes me a better wife or husband.

Lesson Six

"A Strong Spiritual Life"

One of the hardest lessons for human beings to learn is—*"I am not the center of the universe!"* Those who have studied "Earth Science" remember the name of Copernicus! He advocated a revolutionary thought—that the earth was not the center of the universe and the Sun does not move around the earth, but the earth around the Sun.

Along with this concept, a person advocated: *"Each child must experience his or her own 'Copernican revolution.'" In other words, "They must learn that they are not the center of their world!"* This is a radical adjustment for a child because he has always had his wants met. In his own way of thinking he could advocate—*"Why not let things continue that way! Walls should move out of the way before I run into them. Floors should become soft just as I fall on them. Everyone should give me their toys if I want them. The rules of the game should change so I can always win."* But, unfortunately, life does not cooperate and the child is shocked into reality!

What about us adults? Have we been slow in learning this great truth? Do we still have the concept—even in marriage—*"What are you doing for me?"* Do we still look out for #1's interests, feelings, and opinions? A strong spiritual life will drastically change this outlook! ***"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."*** We are convinced that **Strong Spiritual lives** will help make **Strong Marriages!** This can be seen from experience, statistical surveys, and Scripture teaching.

IDENTIFYING A STRONG SPIRITUAL LIFE

1. It is one that learns to trust in God. Abraham serves as a good example. He was called the *"Father of the Faithful."* (Heb. 11:17-20). This is obviously more than just believing that God exists!

- a) It is believing that He is good (Ps. 100:3-5).
- b) It is believing that He cares (1 Pet. 5:7).
- c) It is to be able to say like Job: ***"Though He slays me, yet will I trust in Him."*** (Job 13:15).
- d) It is becoming a personal friend with God (Jn. 15:14).
- e) It is to fully accept the fact that God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18).

2. It is one that allows God to be in control. ***"Commit your ways to the Lord, Trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass."*** (Ps. 37:5). It is to realize how

much I need Him and His directions for my life. It is to realize that I am incapable of directing my life by myself (Jer. 10:23). Jesus is to be the "**LORD**" of my life (Rom. 10:9). He is to be in control of the direction of my life. ***"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*** (Gal. 2:20). It is the turning of one's life over to God!

3. It is one that has died to the old life. Jesus said that we had to die in order to live (Matt. 16:24-25). Men naturally want to live and resist death. Men would prefer to be a Christian without having to be "crucified with Christ!" We want to live our lives the way we want to—selfishly! A strong spiritual life is one that has made the decision to die daily to sin and self and let Christ take charge in their lives (Rom. 6:1-4).

4. It is one that deals with selfishness. Such is at the root of all our sin and troubles. It is when we become concerned about others that we become more self-less. ***"Love does not behave itself rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil..."*** (1 Cor. 13:5). When there has been a misunderstanding or a wrong done, they are the first to initiate the healing process. Of all people, the Christian should want his mate to make it to heaven.

5. It is one that deals with worries or anxieties. Such concerns plagued the weak, but not the strong. They are prepared for what life may bring their way. They find their security in God—not in themselves or others. They seek first the kingdom of God and with assurance they serve Him faithfully—knowing that He will take care of His own (Matt. 6:31-33; Rom. 8:28).

6. It is one that has learned to make good decisions. Right or wrong moral decisions can make or break a marriage. Drinking, Gambling, Drugs, Dishonesty, Infidelity, etc., can played their part in destroying marriages. The willingness to say "NO" to sinful and destructive activities will go a long ways to help strengthen a marriage (2 Cor. 6:14-18; Heb. 5:11-14). A strong Christian is a mature Christian. He has learned from God and by experience how to make wise decisions for his life and for his marriage.

7. It is one that is determined to fulfill their God-given role as a husband or wife. Strong marriages are seen in men and women fulfilling the proper role that they were designed for. These roles did not come by chance or man's imagination, but from God, Himself! The headship and submissive roles are from God (1 Cor. 11:3; Gen. 3:15-16, Eph. 5:22-33). There is no greater work on earth that for a woman to be a good wife and mother. Men have given recognition to this fact by setting aside a special day to remind us of the great

work of mothers. Fathers, in their example and leadership role, can have a great impact on the strength of the home. But when the roles are confused, children have a problem with making proper distinctions and will usually have trouble in their marriages as a result. Obviously, strong marriages do not just happen; they have to be worked at diligently by both husband and wife.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As was true in Isaiah's day, the same is fast becoming true in our day—the moral decay of our nation (Isa. 59:12-16). Great changes are taking place. There is a flood-tide of lawlessness, crime, moral disintegration, and violence that is threatening the very fiber of our nation. Less and less fear of God, less and less respect for the church, less and less respect for family, and less and less desire to obey the laws of the land can be seen all around us. And, the finger points back to the failure of the home to be strong and do its job well.

The church at Corinth was weak and carnal (1 Cor. 3:1-3). They need to become strong spiritually so they could properly deal with the problems in their midst—envy, strife, division, sexual immorality, marital problems, wrong teachings, etc. Paul stated: "***For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.***" (Rom. 8:6). The church needs to develop strong spiritual people so that their homes can be strong spiritually.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the "Copernican revolution?"
2. What are some marks of a strong spiritual person?
3. Why is it important to let God direct our lives?
4. How is a person crucified with Christ?
5. What is possibly the root of all sin?
6. What does worry and anxiety reveal about the person?
7. Why is a strong spiritual person able to make wise decisions?
8. Why is it important to keep the roles of men and women in the home clear and non-confusing to children?
9. What is the difference between a carnally-minded person and a spiritually-minded person?

