

# **Thrive: Growing a Marriage That Lasts a Lifetime**

## **Ephesians 5:25-32; Genesis 2:23-24**

**February 13 & 14, 2010**  
**Chris Carr**

Father, I pray now that as we come to your Word that You would allow us to see familiar texts with fresh eyes. I pray that Your Spirit will work in this room today so that we might be able to understand to a greater degree the wonder of marriage. We realize that as sinful people we cannot on our own comprehend all that You have designed marriage to be and to reflect. So please, Holy Spirit, grace us today with Your presence and work. Lord, I humbly request that You would do some incredible things today in our midst; something that will have a radical impact on our marriages, our families, Your church, our community and our world. May this all be to the glory and honor of You and Your Son. Amen.

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Ephesians 5. For those of you who are new to Bethel, my name is Chris Carr and I serve here as a member of the elder and pastoral teams. I also have the great privilege of being married to Eva, the beautiful lady who leads our choir, for the last 13 1/2 years. In fact, Valentine's Day is a special day for us as we were engaged on Valentine's Day 14 years ago. More on that in a moment.

As I begin I have to be honest and admit that 14 years is not nearly long enough to be an expert on how to make a marriage thrive. But I can tell you that it is plenty of time to be an expert on how not to do it. And so to be an encouragement to you today, I thought I would share a few things that I have learned not to do to grow a thriving marriage:

1) Don't mess up your proposal. If you do you will never hear the end of it. I just told you that Eva and I got engaged on Valentine's Day, but the fact is that we weren't supposed to get engaged that day. I bought the ring that day because it was on sale, but my plan was to wait to propose until the following Monday. However, I got too excited and went ahead and proposed - very poorly I might add - and I have never heard the end of it. That was not a great way to start a marriage.

2) I have shared this before but it is good enough to share again -- don't forget to cancel your ex-girlfriend's credit card once you break up. When your wife of a few months opens the mail to find a credit card with another women's name on it, it doesn't lay a good foundation for a thriving marriage.

3) Don't attempt to watch ESPN while your wife is delivering your child. There might not seem like there is anything that you can do, but you can find something - anything other than watching ESPN.

4) Think before you speak. Not too long after the credit card incident Eva and I had a disagreement over something which neither of us remembers, and in my anger I told her that she was "no kind of wife." Now, to be honest, I don't really remember saying this, but I very much do remember the fireworks that occurred after I said it.

Now, I share all of these for a little humor but also to make it clear today that I am sharing out of weakness and not strength. Eva and I have a very good but imperfect marriage. I am not the perfect husband; far from it. In fact I told her this week as I was studying that I had a good deal of repenting to do myself. And I have, and will continue to do so in the days ahead.

I also shared with the staff this week that I felt more pressure and burden over this message than any that I have ever given. That's because marriage in our culture, and frankly in the church, is in critical condition. I won't barrage you with a bunch of statistics, as the situation is obvious to anyone who is paying attention. But we live in a day and age when over half of all marriages end in divorce. And sadly, the statistics are virtually the same inside and outside of the church. What this means is that statistically speaking, half of you who are married today will not be in 10 years.

But the Bible has a much different picture, doesn't it? I want to suggest that what we need more than anything is an understanding of the grandeur of what God has designed marriage to be. And I believe that understanding begins right here in Ephesians 5. Let's start with verse 25:

*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their 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 Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:25-32)*

There is a lot to be said about this passage, but at its foundation, what Paul is telling us here is that God has designed marriage to be an illustration, a picture, and a model of the relationship that Christ has with His bride, the church. In other words, marriage has much more significance than a simple relationship between a man and a woman - it has the significance of reflecting the most important truth in the entire world - that God became a man and died so that we could enter into an eternal covenantal relationship with Him.

When we see marriage in its proper light, the stakes become massively bigger. It goes far beyond whether or not you are happy, or whether or not it's good for the kids, or even whether or not you are in love. Now marriage becomes about giving an accurate picture to the world of Jesus Christ and the relationship that He has with His bride - you!

Now, I realize that many of you might be saying, "That is too lofty of a goal. I just want to survive my marriage. I am just trying to keep it together. I just want to make it to the end." Perhaps you feel as Rodney Dangerfield did about one of his marriages: "We sleep in separate rooms, we have dinner apart, we take separate vacations - we're doing everything we can to keep our marriage together." But, that's not the way it started out, right?

On our wedding day, most of us experience a little bit of what Adam did when he saw Eve for the first time. Genesis 2 records this: *And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."* (Genesis 2:22-23) Verse 23 can rightly be considered the first love song - perhaps a country love song - but a love song nonetheless. Adam sees Eve and says, *Yes! She is everything I have ever dreamed of. This is going to be great!*

You know, no one gets married, thinking, "Man this is going to be hard. Really, really hard. I just hope we can make a good go of it." I know because I do a fair number of weddings, and almost without exception the couples are very excited and optimistic. They have great hopes for the future. When I perform a wedding my favorite thing to do is to watch the groom when he sees the bride for the first time. Everyone else is normally watching the bride - I watch the groom watching the bride. You know what happens every time when the door opens and she steps through in all her beauty - the biggest smile and grin you have ever seen. And fairly often there are tears - tears of great joy. Why? Because he is in love and has great expectations of the joy that his marriage to this woman is going to bring.

And yet many times it only takes a few weeks or months for disappointment and discouragement to settle in, and rather than thriving, the couple struggles greatly just to survive. But this is not what God wants, not what He desires. It is not what He intended. And most importantly, it is not the way that it has to be.

Please listen to me carefully. All of you who are married or one day hope to be. You can have a thriving, fulfilling, God-honoring, Christ-exalting marriage that lasts a lifetime. No matter where you are today, no matter what difficulty you have experienced or are experiencing, it can happen. And today, we are going to explore how this is possible; how you and your spouse can have a marriage that not only survives, but thrives.

This morning I simply want to share with you two biblical steps to a thriving marriage. Are you ready?

### **Unleash the Power of the Gospel**

First, and most importantly, you must learn to unleash the power of the gospel in your marriage. If you get nothing else from my message today, I want you to get this. Every command and instruction from Scripture and every suggestion from me or some book on marriage only has lasting effectiveness as it is lived out in light of and through the gospel. The implications of this are massive and much bigger than we can cover in one message, but friends, if we are going to get marriage right, we have to get the gospel right first and then take the gospel and apply it to our marriages. So, let's begin by making sure we are all on the same page regarding the gospel.

Perhaps the simplest and most succinct statement that we see regarding the gospel is found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, where Paul tells us this:

*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached*

*to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*

Paul boils the gospel down to four essential truths: 1) I am a sinner, 2) God became a man, 3) died on a cross for my sins, and 4) rose again. The gospel includes more than this and can be studied and applied infinitely, but at its core, in the simplest form, the gospel states that: I am a sinner, God became a man, died on a cross for my sins, and rose again.

### **How does the gospel impact and empower my marriage?**

I would say in at least three significant ways.

#### **1. Humility**

First, the gospel empowers me with humility. Look at what Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 -

*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*

The gospel smacks me right between the eyes with the fact that the biggest problem in my marriage isn't finances; it isn't sex; it isn't my spouse; it's me. Many years ago G.K. Chesterton was asked what the problem with the world was. His response: "It's me." The same is true in my marriage. The biggest problem is me and my sin. I am the chief sinner. You might be asking, "But how does this empower my marriage?" Humility empowers your marriage by leading you to focus on what *you* need to change, not what *your spouse* needs to change. It empowers you to deal with the real problem head on. My experience in my own marriage and in counseling many marriages over the years is that there is always a tendency to focus on what the other person needs to change. *If he would just help out with the kids more. If she would have sex with me more often. If he would get a better job.*

This is always counter-productive, because the one thing in marriage that I can't change is the other person. But I can work, through the power of the gospel on what I need to change. James 4:6 is never more relevant than it is in marriage: *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* Just insert power where grace is there and you get what I am saying, because grace is God's power.

#### **2. Mercy**

Second, the gospel empowers me with mercy. When I live in light of the gospel, I am constantly reminded of the unfathomable mercy that God has shown to me. When I consider my sin against God and how He has not only turned aside His wrath and forgiven my me but also given me Christ's righteousness, it can't help but turn my heart to be more merciful to my spouse. Key verses here include Colossians 3:12-13 and Ephesians 4:32. Let's look at them:

- *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:12-13)*
- *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)*

Do you see the power in these verses, in these truths? When I hated God and wanted nothing to do with Him, He showed me incredible kindness, mercy, compassion, tenderness and love. And now He calls me to treat my spouse the same way.

Let me explain to you how this works. It's pretty simple actually. I take verses like 1 Timothy 1:15, Colossians 3:12-13 and Ephesians 4:32 and I circle them in my Bible. Then I memorize them. Perhaps I write them on a sticky note and put them on the refrigerator or on my dashboard. And I think over them and meditate over them and pray over them, and then I go and live by them. And when my spouse offends me, sins against me, or hurts me in some way, I take my mind to these verses, and with the Spirit's help, I remember that I am a sinner as well, that God has been gracious and forgiven me, and then I forgive my spouse and respond with mercy and grace. That's how the gospel empowers your marriage.

### **3. Hope**

But that isn't it, because the gospel also gives us hope. Hope that my marriage can and will get better. Hope that I can change and my spouse can change. Hope that my marriage can thrive and bring me joy. The basis for this is the fact that God took the worst circumstance in all of history, the death of His perfect son on a Roman cross, and used that for ultimate, incredible good. The fact is, that if God can do that, He can do that in my marriage as well.

A personal word of encouragement here. We have many struggling marriages at Bethel, but we also have lots of strong marriages and many of them are marriages that at one time were struggling; some desperately so. None of you here have the privilege that I do to look out over the group that is here and be able to pick out couples who were headed for or perhaps even near divorce but who now have thriving marriages. But trust me; it happens here all the time and it can happen for you. You just have to learn, as they did, how to empower your marriage through the gospel.

Ok, that's one step for growing a thriving marriage, but here is another, as a couple you must learn to:

### **Pursue Oneness**

For this, let's look at the end of Genesis 2. Basically what we see beginning in verse 21 is that God puts Adam to sleep, takes out one of his ribs, creates Eve, wakes Adam up, Adam responds, "Great job God!" and then God presides over the first wedding ceremony, which apparently was very short because it is only one verse. Look with me at verse 24:

*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)*

This is the most significant verse in Scripture regarding marriage as it is repeated elsewhere four times and mentioned in another. In it, we have God's three step blueprint for marriage.

First, the husband and wife are to:

1. **Leave their parents.** The Hebrew word for leave here is very strong; it literally means to abandon. This is, of course, an intended exaggeration to make the point that when a couple is joined as husband and wife they form a new relationship that takes priority over all others.

Second, the husband and wife are to:

2. **Hold fast to one another.** The word behind hold fast means to cement together - to stick like glue, or to be welded together so that the two cannot be separated without damage to both. That's why Jesus says in Mark 10:9: *Therefore **what God** has joined together, let man not separate.* In other words, when God glues two people together, it is meant to be for life. And it's also why when we disobey this command, it causes great pain to both the husband and the wife.

Finally, and most importantly, the husband and wife are called to:

3. **Pursue oneness.** That's what one flesh means, to become one. Becoming one flesh is much like holiness in the life of a believer. It is both something we are and something we are to pursue. As husband and wife, we are one and yet we also are called to pursue oneness. This oneness certainly includes physical union but it also includes spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social oneness as well. Husband and wife are called to pursue oneness in every aspect of life.

Men and women, please listen to me carefully. God did not give you your spouse simply to meet your physical needs, whether sexual or otherwise. He gave you your spouse so you could meet each other's needs - spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, as well as physically. He gave you to each other so you could meet one another's needs in every area.

God designed marriage with oneness in mind. When we pursue and experience this, we find joy. When we don't, we find frustration and difficulty. It's as simple as that. So, let's get practical now and talk about what we can do to pursue oneness in our marriages.

## **How to practically pursue oneness in marriage**

### **Focus on spiritual oneness**

*Preparing for Marriage*, the premarital counseling curriculum that we use here at Bethel, states it this way:

*For your marriage to become what God intended it to be, you must make a commitment to put God at the center of your relationship. The heart of a Oneness Marriage is an intensely spiritual relationship between one man and one woman and their God. It demands a lifelong process of relying on God and forging an enduring relationship according to His design.*  
(*Preparing for Marriage*)

What this means is that marriage is not a relationship between two people but rather three. God has intended the marital relationship to be one in which the husband and wife pursue God together. Marriages today are focused on many things - sex, money, affluence, security, children, but the only focus that ultimately promotes oneness is a focus upon Christ.

Now on this point I want to take a moment and specifically address the husbands here. In fact, I want to return to Ephesians 5 and have all the husbands stand and read verses 25-28 with me:

*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

Men, let's just lay it out there. Paul makes it very clear here that making sure there is a spiritual focus in our marriage is our responsibility. We are responsible to love our wives and to show that by spiritually shepherding them. I stand before you today and admit that I fail in this area more than any other. And yet this is the most important. If I am a good provider and a good father and fun to be around, and I fail to lead my wife spiritually, I fail as a husband in God's eyes. The spiritual aspect of my relationship with my wife is the most important and influences every other area of my husbandry. And men, we need to do better in this; we *must* do better in this.

This is not easy. In fact, it's hard. Really hard. But let's be men and strap it up and hunker down and start getting it done. Let's begin to be what God has called and empowered us to be. Let's lead our wives and our children to love Christ and follow Him.

A second step to promoting oneness is to become a student of your spouse.

### **Study your spouse**

I have two passages to share here, one for men and one for women. Let's begin in 1 Peter 3:7 - *Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.*

"Understanding way" means according to knowledge. Let's be honest, men and women are different. Men do not understand women, and vice versa. And so if we are going to live with our wives according to knowledge, we are going to have to go back to school and become students again. We have to learn what she likes and what she dislikes. How she wants and needs to be loved. What makes her feel cherished and what makes her feel cheapened. We have to dedicate ourselves to becoming lifelong students of our wives.

Ladies, you also have to become a student of your husband. A huge part of your role as a wife is to be a complement to your husband. Genesis 2 says that God made Eve to be a "helper" to Adam. This does not mean his servant but rather as a friend and ally to support and aid him to be everything God has called him to be. Use your unique talents and abilities

to strengthen and encourage him. Pursuing oneness with your husband means that you study him so you can figure out how you can best come alongside of him to be his companion, friend and complement. Ladies, let me tell you a little secret. Your husbands want and need this. It's your job to find out how.

### **Make marriage a priority**

If you are like me, right now you are thinking, *This is great but where do I find the time?* I don't have time to accomplish everything that I need to do right now. I am going to suggest something fairly radical today. I am going to suggest that you take a look at your life and you cut whatever you need to so that you have more time to focus upon your marriage. It might be that you need to cut back on how much you are working. It might be that you have to cut back on the kids' activities. Some of us spend more time running our kids to soccer practice than we do with our spouse. It might be that you have to cut back or cut out your hobby. It might mean that you need to cut back on entertainment - TV, Internet, Facebook, whatever. It might even mean you have to cut back on your involvement in church.

Listen, all of the things that we have talked about are true, but if we don't exercise discipline and make the hard choice to prioritize our marriage, all of our theology is for naught. If I am going to pursue oneness with my wife, I have to make it a priority and spend the time that it takes to make it happen.

I want to finish today by sharing with you about a man who has his priorities straight. His name is Robertson McQuilken. McQuilken was the President of Columbia Bible College and Seminary from 1968-1990 and is a well-know New Testament theologian, author, and speaker. In the early '80s his wife Muriel was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. As her disease gradually progressed, it became more and more difficult on her for him to be absent. So, in 1990, at the height of his career, McQuilken resigned from his position at Columbia to take care of Muriel full-time. [The audio from his resignation speech at the college was played for those in the auditorium.] Would you do the same for your spouse?

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