

Pre-Marital Counseling— for *Married* People!



By Paul David Tripp

What passages of Scripture help you make sense out of what is going on right now in your marriage or in the marriages of those people to whom you minister? 1 Peter 3:1-9? Hebrews 13:4? Matthew 5:31-32?

One rarely referred to passage is 2 Corinthians 11. It gives a model for understanding the Lord's plan for your marriage. It is one of those curious little passages of Scripture that you could easily miss in the drama of First and Second Corinthians. These wonderful verses reorient us as we think about the marriages that God gives us.

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the spirit's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor. 11:1-3)

This passage suggests that married people really need pre-marital counseling! How is that possible?

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"Now" Marriage and "Then" Marriage

Second Corinthians 11 will give you a completely different view of your marriage and what God has planned and purposed for it. I don't know if you realize this, but most of what the Bible has to say about marriage is not in the so-called "marriage passages." Most of what orients us to what God is doing in us and in our marriages is not just in those passages that particularly talk about a husband or a wife. Instead, the whole flow of the biblical narrative helps us understand what God is seeking to do in the midst of this most intimate of human relationships.

In effect Paul says this to his brothers and sisters in Corinth,

I understand I have been a little hyper. I have been hovering over you an awful lot. You have been gracious. You have lived with my foolishness. But I am very concerned for you. I am concerned because I have promised you to a husband, and I'm afraid you're going to wander away.

What in the world is Paul talking about?

The best way to understand your marriage and what goes on there is this: your earthly marriage is but a *preparation* for a greater, more wonderful, wedding. All of us will be THE bride when we finally and eternally unite in intimate communion to THE groom, Jesus Christ. Your earthly marriage is not God's goal. It is rather God's means to a greater, deeper, fuller goal. If

you don't get that, you are going to be very confused. You might even think that God is confused, or irrelevant, because marriage is not going to make any sense to you.

Think about this. None of us who are married has gotten our marital dreams, have we? Be honest with yourself. You all went into marriage with your own personal vision of what you wanted it to be, didn't you? Throughout your marriage you progressively gave up pieces of your romantic fantasy. Some of you are still holding on to little elements of your old dream with tight fists. Perhaps you are still working very hard to get some vestige of that dream! Maybe you want a certain level of romance, or a style of communication, or a kind of house. Perhaps you hold onto a vision for your physical relationship, or a dream about your family's lifestyle.

If you miss what the Apostle Paul is saying in this passage, your marriage will not make sense at all, because your marriage has two fallible, swaying, confused, and controlling

marriage." All those stresses, responsibilities, accountability, and pressures of marital intimacy (all the things that make up this comprehensive relationship) are but a preparation for a greater and fuller marriage. You have been chosen to be part of the ultimate wedding, more glorious than you could ever imagine. You will dwell in a union that is far beyond anything your mind could ever conceive. It's way beyond anything you could ever ask or want. What a shame it is to live bitter, disappointed, and discouraged because the *now* relationship does not match your dream, when the *then* relationship is far better than your dream could ever be.

Here is Paul's paradigm. Your *now* marriage isn't to be viewed as a final destination, but rather a place of preparation for the marriage that is to come. All the struggles of *now* are a preparation for the glories of *then*.

Paul says, "I am jealous with a godly jealousy." The picture is of an arranged marriage. The person who has arranged the marriage is now hovering over it, wondering if

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people in it! You would think God in his wisdom and love would put sanctification *before* marriage. Wouldn't it make sense for God to get us fully conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus before we got married? Wouldn't that make marriage automatically easier and more enjoyable? That is what you want—to marry a fully sanctified person! You want a glorified, loving, perfectly wonderful person to live with you! It is hard not to be disappointed with the reality that you live with a sinner just like you. Is this some horrible, divine mistake? Did God just get the cart in front of the horse?

Some people not only conclude that their spouse has failed them, but they conclude that God has failed. He has forgotten them because marriage just doesn't seem to be working the way they envisioned it would work. Paul says something radical here in 2 Corinthians 2:11. "Don't you get what's going on here? This earthly marriage is not the ultimate marriage. It is the preparatory marriage for the *ultimate*

the person he has promised to the groom will remain faithful. He can arrange the marriage, but he cannot control the faithfulness. He says, "My jealousy is a godly jealousy." Do you know what he means by that? Paul's jealousy reflects the jealous heart of God. When God was giving the Law and He commanded that we worship only Him, He said, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

Isn't it true that pure and true love is always appropriately jealous? Wives, what if your husband plopped himself down on the couch at home next to you, pulled you close to him, placed your head on his shoulder, and said to you very romantically, "Of all the women in my life, at this moment I love you the most!" You would not find that very satisfying! You would not say, "Oh, say it again!" You would say, "Don't you ever say that again!" You understand the epicenter of true love is unchallenged devotion of heart. Here's the point: God loves you and me so much that He is utterly unwilling

to share us.

The most significant question of this earthly *now* marriage is not, "Do we love one another enough?" The most significant question is, "Are we actually, functionally, and practically devoted to Christ?" The sweetest gift, husbands, that you can give your wife, and the sweetest gift, wives, that you can give your husband, is your pure devotion to Christ. I hope you can grasp the practicality of this. The problems in our *now* marriages first result from our lack of love for the Lord. Because we do not love Him as we should, we end up not loving one another as we should.

Think about those terrible situations when a husband or wife has been unfaithful to his or her mate. Isn't it true that at the center, this act of unfaithfulness is not that this person has loved another person more than you, but rather, this person has loved himself more than he has loved you? Because of that, he has been willing to go wherever his desire for pleasure would lead him.

marriage that God describes in the Bible as His intention.

Paul says, "I reflect the jealous love of God. God is unwilling to share us. We have been promised to a husband who is jealous. He wants the practical motivation of your life to be Him. Do you know what that means? It means on a Tuesday night, when it would be really satisfying to let your words rip, and to finally tell your wife all the ways that she has stood in the way of your dream, you lay hold of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and you tell her that you love her. You do not tell her that she is perfect. You do not point out all the things she needs to work on in your marriage, but in that moment you do what is an expression of love for Christ rather than what is an expression of love for self. Brothers and sisters, if you have ever been around a deeply, troubled marriage, you know that you are around a husband and wife who, all too often, have gone where their desires have taken them. They had nothing greater to

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Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Jesus Christ came "that those who live would no longer live unto themselves but unto Him who loved them and gave Himself for them." Jesus came so that we would give up that dramatically motivating love for ourselves and be motivated in practical ways by love for Him. Think of what happens when a husband is living for himself and a wife is living for herself. Think of what it is like to live with someone whose deepest commitment is to the Almighty ME. In this kind of marriage all you have is selfish desire battling selfish desire. That is not a description of marriage—it is a prescription for war! You do not solve that war by compromises, or bargains or deals. You only solve that war when love of self is replaced by something wonderful and wholesome: love for Christ because of the love of Christ. If a husband loves Christ more than anything else, and a wife loves Christ more than anything else, they will move toward the same goal. They have great potential for the kind of

restrain, direct, or shape their marriage than "what I want, when I want it, how I want it." Nothing is more wholesome to the *now* marriage than to keep the *then* marriage in view. Look at that person to whom you are married as the bride of Christ, and do everything you can to encourage their devotion to Christ.

Paul gives a wonderful promise and a terrible warning in Galatians 5:13-15. First, he holds out something unimaginably good:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serves one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now hear the warning:

If you keep on biting and devouring one another, watch out, or you will be destroyed by one another.

That kind of horizontal battle, motivated by

self-love, will take our eyes away from the Lord Jesus Christ, away from what He is doing. Because it removes Jesus from the scene, it will hurt us spiritually. The result: an endless, debilitating battle over whose dream will win. That is not a marriage; that is war. The only thing that can preserve us from an endless move to war over whose desires will win, is devotion to Christ.

The Battle: What Rules Your Heart? What Shapes Your Life?

Let me take you further in 2 Corinthians 1. Consider the third verse with me: "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the spirit's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." This is really the drama of marriage—it is not simply about habits of communication, strategies for conflict resolution, and commitment to a satisfying physical relationship. Something dramatic is going on beneath all these things. Maybe you

functionally shaped by a deep love for the Lord Jesus Christ and a desire to live in the context of this most intimate relationship in a way that pleases Him and advances His agenda in us and in our spouses.

Let me pose a final question. Love of *what* would challenge your devotion to Christ? What is the seductive "lover" that replaces Christ in your life? Perhaps your job has become more than just a job, it has become the focus of your life, the place where you get identity, meaning, and reputation. And if you are honest, more and more it has become the thing for which you live. Maybe it is your family dream. Perhaps you are living your life through your children. Perhaps where you get your identity, your meaning, and purpose. Perhaps you see your children as your show piece of a well-lived life. Children, who are sinners, do not make very good trophies.

I am asking this question: If we were to sit down together and watch the video of your marriage, what would we say you really love?

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are thinking, "Yes, Paul, last Wednesday night was terrible!" But there is a deeper drama below those surface dramas. The Apostle Paul says, "Don't you see what's happening? There is a battle being waged in the middle of every situation and conversation in your marriage." It is a battle for what love will rule your heart, what desire will shape your life. Whatever wins that battle will shape the way you respond to your husband or wife. Paul says, "I'm so concerned because there's an enemy who's a trickster." He is good at wooing us away. He is good at tricking our minds with plausible lies. We say things, to ourselves, "Well, if you were married to this man, you'd be responding the same way." "If you had to deal with these kids, you'd be as crazy and angry as I am." "If, if, if, if." These subtle arguments of the enemy that take us away from this one thing to which we have been called—a life that is practically and

What would we say that you are really living for? Where is your true devotion? At times, the *now* marriage is literally in the way of God's preparation for the *then* marriage. We forget that even though we are married, we are all engaged as well. There has been an arranged marriage. Do you know when it was arranged? Before the earth was created, You and I were given away. All the struggles of our marriages right now are not the product of God forgetting us. God has not messed up the plan and somehow gotten the cart before the horse. What is going on now is that God is very carefully and personally, day-by-day, moment-by-moment, preparing us for the ultimate wedding and for a marital experience that is far beyond our wildest dreams. It will be—are you ready for this?—a perfect marriage. Isn't that sweet? You'll have your perfect marriage; you are just not going to have it yet. God wants you

to understand that all you are going through *now* is preparation. And you can resist God's preparation, or you can embrace it.

Consider taking this as your goal: I want to be part of what God is doing in my marriage. I want to be part of what God is doing in my spouse. I want to be part of His work of preparation. I want to be an instrument in His hands. This is how I want to live. I want to be humble, gentle, kind, forgiving, forbearing, gracious, loving, and persevering. Why? Because as I do these things, the work of Jesus will thrive in our marriage. And as that happens, we will get all the more ready for that ultimate wedding and the perfect marriage. Isn't that sweet?

Understand this—no trouble you face today is the product of God's forgetting. No trial you face is the result of His messing up the plan. God is in all of those hard moments jealously claiming your love so that you will be fully devoted to Him and ready for the perfect

marriage. God help us to look at our marriages and see more than our dreams. He can help us see that we have been betrothed to Christ for eternity.

Let's pray. Thank you, Lord, for this wonderful passage of Scripture that gives us such a different way to think about what is happening in our marriages right now. Lord, I pray that we would grab a hold of the thought that this is a time of preparation, that we are engaged people, and You are at work in us every day and in every circumstance of life, using this comprehensive relationship to prepare us for something wonderful to come. You are working to change us and conform us into Your image, to make us ready for that day when we will be called to the great wedding feast, when we will enter into that perfect union with the ultimate lover, Christ. May we not stand in the way of what You are doing. May we give ourselves to be fully part of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.