Core Seminars—Marriage (Week 1)

**Is God at the Center of Your Marriage?**

**Introduction: Jim & Jill’s Fight**

Let’s start with a story about a couple named Jill and John. Jill and John are talking about a disagreement with their finances.

Jill: “Do we need to think through what to do with our money? We’ve got a lot more than expected this year.”

John: “That’s a good question. We can contact a financial advisor at my job and see if he has any advice. But it costs money to see this guy.”

Jill: “But the money has been sitting in our account for a while. We need to do something.”

John: “I know...I know. We’ve got to do something about it, but I don’t want to rush. Don’t you trust me? We agreed that ***I’ll*** handle the finances.”

Jill: “Honey, I trust you, but you’re not all that pro-active when it comes to investments.”

John (in a sarcastic tone): “Well, I could name a few areas that you are not pro-active that is hurting us!”

Jill (offended by the last comment): “Stop it, John. That was mean.”

John: “Well, it’s true.”

Jill starts to cry. John storms out of the room. End of discussion.

Now you and I might listen in on a conversation like this and say, “That poor couple….they’ve got a lot of issues to work through, don’t they?” Jill questioned John’s handling of the family finances. John was defensive (“***I’ll*** handle it”) and then went on the offensive (“I could name a few areas that you are not pro-active..”). Jill made an honest critique of John, but John took it personally. Jill is offended by John’s rebuttal and starts to cry. Rather than reconciling and apologizing, John storms out of the room, which is never a good way to end a marital discussion.

It would be easy to look at this couple and think they’ve got a lot of problems in their marriage—arguing over finances, personalizing comments, and not handling conflict well. But believe it or not, their biggest problem is not about money, communication, or even their marital relationship. Their biggest problem is that their marriage is *godless*. In Jim and Jill’s case, you’ll find that this one conversation is not unusual. Practically speaking, most of their marriage doesn’t involve God. They talk a lot about their relationship, a lot about their “stuff,” a lot about their jobs, but very little about God. Are you at all like Jim and Jill? Do you live in a godless marriage?

In many of our marriages we are missing God at the center. Even as Christians, we sadly live *atheist* marriages—marriages that are devoid of God and his Word. Sure we go to church. Sure many of us try to do personal bible reading. Sure we want to be more faithful. Yet, in reality, many of us don’t often enough put God and his Word at the center of our marital relationships.

**Three Reasons for Godless Marriages**

So the obvious question is, “Why? So why is this the case? Why do so many of us live in godless marriages?”

1. Our spiritual immaturity.

“Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. **2**I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. **3**You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? **4**For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?” (2 Cor 3:1-3).

Paul is addressing the Corinthians and criticizes their spiritual immaturity. Despite that they are Christians, Paul condemns them as being more worldly than they are spiritual. The stinging criticism is in his label—he calls them “mere infants in Christ” (v. 1). Notice the analogy: Much like a baby who was not ready for solid food so also Paul gives the Corinthians milk instead of solid food. And why? verse 3: “You are still worldly.”

In our marriages, when we are more preoccupied with worldly things than with spiritual matters, we show our immaturity in the faith. In the case of the Corinthians, their worldliness was shown by their jealousy and quarreling and the divisions that resulted from their fighting about their favorite leaders. In our marriages, it can be much the same. In our marriages, we are more preoccupied with the things of this world more than we are concerned about God, Christ, church, the Bible or our faith. And so our spiritual diets reflect much the same—we only take in milk rather than solid food.

1. Our unbelief and our selfishness

The author of Hebrews writes: “**12**See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. **13**But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. **14**We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb 3:12-14).

The author of Hebrews is addressing Christians (hence, the term “brothers”) and he is warning them about choosing unbelief. Look at the scary consequence of unbelief—the person “turns away from the living God” (v. 12) and our hearts “may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (v. 13).

*Warning to Christians about being a non-Christian*. In a room this large, there are bound to be people who self-identify as Christians, and yet your consistent choice to follow a faithless path shows that you are probably not a Christian. You show consistently in the choices you make in your life and in your marriage that you have put more faith in yourself or this world more than you have in following God. Think about your marriage for a moment: does your marriage reflect a faithful path that follows God and seeks to obey his Word, or have you consistently choosing not to believe in God and to follow him? The warning for you: if you consistently choose unbelief in your life and marriage, you can hold no confidence you are a Christian. Hence, the author of Hebrews says in v. 14, “We have come to share in Christ *if we hold firmly till the end* the confidence we had at first.”

*Warning to Christians about giving in to momentary atheism.* For most of us here today, the question is not if we are a Christian or not. Rather, the question will be as Christians, are there certain times in our marriages when we choose unbelief and don’t fight for faith? Christian marriages can often be plagued with momentary atheism—we choose a *faithless* path rather than trust in God. Sometimes this is out of ignorance—we just don’t think about God and how his Word relates to our lives. We might call this *passive* unbelief. Maybe we watched our parents live in faithless marriages, so that’s what we are familiar with. Or maybe we’ve never been taught how to apply God’s Word to our marriage, so we live as best we know how.

But more often than not, we (as Christians) are *actively* choosing unbelief. We know God’s way, but we choose a different path, one which involves turning away from God. We are choosing deliberate rebellion against God. I know what God says to me, and I choose not to do it.

Husbands, active unbelief in your marriage might look like this:

* I know I am to sacrifice for my wife, like Christ sacrificed his life for the church, but I choose not to do so. Rather than serve her, I’d rather fulfill my own comfort and desires. (Eph 5:21-33; Mark 10:43-45)
* I know I am to engage my wife emotionally, but it is easier to avoid the hard stuff and to stay superficial.
* I know what I want out of our marriage and out of life, so I control my wife. I tell her what to do and how to do it. I don’t want God to be in charge; I want to be in charge.
* I know I am to confess my sin to my wife and be humble, but my pride prevents me from doing so.

Wives, active unbelief in your marriage might look like this:

* I know that I am more competent than my husband. Rather than following his leadership, I’d rather take control of the situation. (Gen 3:15)
* I am hurt or frustrated so to get back at him by saying mean things or unleashing my anger. (Eph 4:29; Matt 12:34-35).
* I am going to trust my assumptions about him more than I trust his proven character or his track record.
* I am going to nag him until I get what I want. (Judges 16:16; ?)

To do the things that God asks of you requires faith/trust in God. If we don’t trust God, it is much easier to follow a faithless path. In each of the examples I just listed, the husband or wife is choosing to follow their own way rather than trust that God’s way is better for their marriage. If I don’t choose God, who or what am I choosing instead? Usually myself. I choosing trust myself instead of God. If God is not at the center of my marriage, if I don’t trust God or his ways, then the alternative is usually to make my marriage ultimately about me. Faithless-ness often quickly leads to selfishness, or vice-versa. Notice how all of the above statements for husbands and wives started with “I…” – I know, I am hurt, I want, I assume, etc.

1. Trapped in the Horizontal and Forgetting God’s Glory

Marriage exists on two planes: the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal relationship – what goes on between me and my spouse, how we talk, how we love, how we argue, how we parent, how we live together, etc.—this is what Scripture refers to as the one-flesh dynamic (Gen 2:24). One goal for my marriage is unity. That’s what “one-flesh” means—unity, working as a team, or as Jesus describes in Mark 10, the two becoming one (vs. 8-9).

What happens in the day to day travails of marriage? Often our sinful choices and attitudes in marriage keep us entrenched in the horizontal dynamics. You are preoccupied with your spouse—what he or she does, thinks, reacts, desires, acts, etc. Because the day to day battles of marriage are fought in the trenches, we often lose sight of bigger things. We can too quickly forget about the vertical dimension of our marriage.

The ultimate goal of your marriage is to bring glory to God. More than just a human relationship, marriage is meant to be a pointer to a greater spiritual reality, the relationship of Christ and his bride the church (Eph 5:21-33). So your marriage is not just about the two of you. It is supposed to be about God and his greater glory. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

One of the classic mistakes of most Christian marriages is that we spend most of our time in a horizontal plane; and we pay little or no attention to the vertical dimensions of marriage. In the case of Jim and Jill, they have had financial discussions and arguments again and again and again, and actually never talked about God.

Think about your own marriage for a moment. How much time do you spend in the horizontal dimensions without any reference to God? Maybe you feel stuck in the trenches, and have lost sight of the greater purposes about your marriage? Acknowledging God’s glory means acknowledging that this marriage is less about me and my spouse, and much more about God.

1. Life compartments.

Maybe we are in a Christian marriage, and yet what we do is compartmentalize God in one area or another, or we box God out of certain areas. Maybe I know how to study my Bible, how to pray, how to talk to my kids about God, but I don’t know how he relates to the certain areas of my life.

* Sex – As a married man or woman, I have sex in my marriage, but I never communicate about sex, let alone talk about God’s purposes for sex and how it relates to our marriage.
* Money—Just like Jim and Jill, we can pursue a lot of practical principles to help steward our money, but we don’t ever talk about how God relates or what the Bible says about money.
* Career—my accomplishments, my career goals, my driven nature matter more than godly priorities in my life. Even as a Christian, my exhaustive work hours can be housed under the self-protective label of providing for my family. Am I willing to put my marriage before my career? How does God relate to my work goals and career ambitions?
* Home Life—Maybe I’m more interested in what is big, comfortable and secure than building a home that has the aroma of Christ and built on the foundation of the gospel.

Look at the many different areas that you juggle in your life, and you see that it is possible to think in very secular terms in any of these areas. Maybe there are one or two areas of our life that are holdouts to God. Just take a moment and think what those areas might be. (pause, give them time to think) Maybe we haven’t considered what it means for God to transform these particular parts of our life.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS AND GIVE AWAY A BOOK]

**Looking Up: Bring God into the Center and Fighting for Faith**

Sarah and I have been sorting through a big decision in our family, and we’ve talked about this for about six or seven months. On our date night last week, I came prepared with a mental list of positives and negatives to help sort through the conversation.

Yet, at one point, she said, “We’ve been spending a lot of time sorting through this decision by only considering our own desires and future plans. Shouldn’t we consider what does God have to do with it?” Ouch. She was right. We were approaching the decision in a godless fashion. And worst of all, I am a pastor of this church. It can happen to even the best of us!

Rather than being trapped in the horizontal trenches or stuck in our own life compartments, in marriage, we need to lift our gaze up to heaven and consider the Lord and Maker of the universe. I was reminded of words of the prophet Isaiah: “**25**To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. **26**Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:  Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:25-26).

What would it mean to bring God into the center of your marriage? Four suggestions.

1. Start by asking a simple question: “What about God?”

Much like my wife, who asked the question, “How does God relate to this issue?”, so also many of us need to ask the same basic question, whether it relates to our overall marriage, or to one particular area. We need to start with this basic question, and then pray that God would reveal himself to us as we sort through our marriages.

1. Trusting God and Living a Gospel-Centered Life.

*Trusting God.* The most common way that Christian couples try to fix their marriage is to do exactly that—fix their marriage. The focus on their relationship with one another, what we referred to as staying trapped in the horizontal plane of their marriage. Don’t get me wrong, much of the basic work of marriage (and really any Christian relationship) involves the hard work of working things out with one another. Some examples from Proverbs: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” 15:1; “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver”, 25:11.

But consider what Solomon says about our trust in God: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov 3:5-6).

Christian marriages are built like a triangle.

 GOD

 ***trust*** ***trust***

 JIM JILL

(The husband) ***union*** (The wife)

As a Christian couple, if our union is the only thing holding you together, then you are no better than a non-Christian couple. Ultimately, our marriage must start with both husband and wife trusting in God first and foremost. Healthy, vibrant Christian marriages start with a trust in God. Solomon says in Proverbs 3 that Christians must always begin life with a trust in God. In all of our ways in marriage, we lean less on our own understanding, and we must acknowledge God first, and then trust that he (God) will make our paths straight.

Do you have a marriage that is driven by a trust in God? What else have you chosen to put your trust in?

*Living a Gospel-centered Life*. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ came to die on the cross as a substitute for sinners. What does God ask of us in response to this message? Repentance and faith, two important words used throughout the NT.

Repentance is a turning of our back on our sin. One of the most important things you can do for your marriage is to take your own sin seriously. Our sinful tendency is to want to spend more time focused on the sins of our spouse, yet the Bible often directs us to look at our own heart first. “How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Luke 6:42).

The other thing asked of us is to have faith in Christ. The object of our faith is God’s son. We show our trust of the father but committing our life to his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. And in marriage, our faith is demonstrated in following the words of Christ as best way to live out marriage.

1. Pursue God’s common means of grace for your marriage.

You might be waiting for a lightning bolt from the sky, or some other dramatic means to transform your marriage, or we can (as husbands and wives) pursue God’s common means of grace that he has put all around us. Ask yourself:

* Do my spouse and I go to church regularly? (church attendance)
* Have we committed ourselves to a congregation, and entrusted our marriage to the oversight of elders in a church? (church membership)
* Have we built up relationships around us to help us and protect our marriage? (Christian fellowship and relational support)
* Do we spend time regularly in God’s word together as a couple and individually? (devotional life)
1. Love Your Spouse

It might seem silly to talk about this. On the one hand, it seems obvious that to have a good marriage you must love your spouse. Yet we show that we really do love and trust God by demonstrating it in the way we love our spouse. The apostle John puts it in these terms: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). If you call yourself a Christian and yet your love for God doesn’t evidence itself in the way you love your spouse, then John says you are a liar. We evidence our faith by the way we live in our marriages (James 2:14-26). Does your trust in God and love for his son result in a trusting, loving disposition towards your spouse? And if not, why not?

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS, GIVE OUT A BOOK, AND SWITCH TO DANNY?]