

## **GOD-DESIGNED MARRIAGE**

### **Building Block #4 – The Care**

Right now we are in the thick of gardening season, praise the Lord! There's something about playing in the dirt and growing things that's just good. If you are even remotely familiar with gardening, you know that to have a healthy and fruitful garden, it's going to take some work. It requires diligence and attention. You need to be out there in the garden just about every day doing something, be it watering, fertilizing, weeding, dealing with pests or diseases plants get. If you don't, you might not have much of a garden at all!

At the end of last week, my garden looked great. We just started enjoying the first fruits and everything looked normal – from a distance. But on my day off on Monday morning, I began to notice some squash bugs... everywhere. These are bugs that will lay eggs mostly on the cucurbit plants like pumpkins, cucumbers, squash and zucchini plants. They basically suck the sap out of the plants, causing them to wilt, turn yellow, and die. In very short order, I almost lost all my squash plants but some are making a comeback. To treat these pests, you can use some sort of insecticide but honestly the best thing you can do is to be out there often and squash the adults and looking under every leaf looking to find the eggs and dispose of them. It's very tedious work!

Now, in our God-Designed marriage series we're talking about healthy, strong, flourishing marriages and homes. But do you know that more homes are destroyed every year by tiny, invasive pests like termites than by fires?<sup>1</sup> In most cases when a house collapses it is not on account of a catastrophe, but on account of something that goes undetected for long periods of time like termites gnawing away at the framework or a slow water leak somewhere. That's something of what we are going to look at today as we study our **4<sup>th</sup> building block** called **The Care** of marriage.

This is a critical building block to lay because **every marriage is going to experience conflict and we have to care for the marriage by handling conflict properly**, lest some pest like anger or unforgiveness creep into our homes and gnaw away at the framework or suck the vitality out of our relationships. Marriages are a lot like gardens or homes, requiring constant maintenance and attention. You might not be able to get rid of all of the pests, but you can certainly exterminate enough to salvage it or see it flourish again. First, we're turning to James 4:1-3 where we will find the main source of conflict and I'll give you a hint: it has nothing to do with the color of your hair or ethnicity or oppression, in case you have red hair or Irish blood or are taking classes in CRT.

#### **I. THE SOURCE OF CONFLICT. (James 4:1-3)**

*“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”*

So just after Adam and Eve were joined together in marriage, it says they were naked and unashamed (Gen. 2:25). Before sin, there was total transparency, openness, communication, communion, fulfillment, harmony, selflessness, and love. Motives were pure. They were focused on one another and enthralled with each other. We could say they had **perfect oneness**. However, after they sinned, what happened? Their focus went immediately inward. They looked to themselves. They began to cover themselves. They began to experience shame, guilt, fear, and anger. They began to experience separation from God and from each other. After God called them out of hiding and asked them who was responsible, they began blame shifting. Adam blamed God for giving him Eve and Eve blamed Satan. Neither one was willing to say, *“I’m sorry. I was wrong.”* Sin brought the first conflict into the world.

James is very blunt when he says that the source of our conflicts and quarrels today is due to the sin nature inside of us that we inherited from Adam and Eve. Paul echoes James in Romans 7, *“I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am!”* We tend to think problem are never us and always someone else. But James says you need to consider yourself first as the problem. By nature, you lust. You are envious. You desire. You love yourself. You don’t put it this way, but you want to be like god. Jon Lebar keeps using that term **godship**. Satan tempted Eve, saying, *“You can be like god!”* Instead of letting God be God, we try to be God and get everyone to orbit around us. There’s only one problem with that: others are trying to get us to orbit around them! We’re very manipulative creatures if we’re not careful. We use people to serve our desires.

The word **“pleasures”** or maybe your translation says “desires” or “passions,” is a Greek word that is also behind our English word **“hedonism”** which is the belief that my personal pleasure or my happiness is the sole end or chief good in life.<sup>2</sup> There is a way in which God has designed us to seek pleasure but not without obedience to God. Pleasures can be good or bad, depending on your character.<sup>3</sup> But when we live for our desires and they don’t get fulfilled, our rights are violated or expectations aren’t met, it leads to conflict and anger. And **anger** pushes people away. It’s a relationship killer. Sometimes that anger looks like a simmering crockpot and sometimes it’s a firecracker, but typically it’s the result of our desires not being met. Someone hasn’t bowed down to us as “god” and “lord.”

Paul David Tripp says, *“Where marriages always go wrong is when I want the right to set the rules by which this relationship will work. That’s at the bottom of every marriage difficulty. I don’t want to have to say I’m sorry. I don’t want to serve you. That’s taking God’s position. That’s writing my own law. Now I’m angry not because you’ve broken God’s law but because you’ve broken my law. Think about how much of our anger has nothing to do with God at all.”<sup>4</sup>* He’s saying so many of our conflicts are not our spouse’s problem. They’re really *our* problem. So one of the first questions we need to ask ourselves when the anger light comes on on our emotional dashboard is, *“Is this something that really requires forgiveness, or is this just me being selfish? Did they really sin against me or God, or do I just need to get over myself and quit playing God? Do I just need to repent?”*

When that anger light comes on, you really have to think about why it is on before you do or say anything because it may have no footing. We're can make a federal case out of some towels or dirty socks on the floor. In the Art of Marriage series they call those people who leave towels and socks on the floor, droppers. *"I can't believe I married a "dropper"! My dad was a dropper! I told myself I'd never marry a dropper!"* Is there anything sinful about dropping a towel or sock on the floor? No, but we'll take our spouse to court over it, right? I'll drag my spouse into my courtroom over her cooking the eggs wrong or not buttering the toast to the margins. Instead of rolling the tube of toothpaste, she squeezes it! The horror of marrying a squeezer! You see, there's a host of unmet expectations or imperfections that crop up in marriage. We can hide these imperfections while we're dating, but when we move in together it all comes out.

### **Care Response #1 – Humble yourself.**

What do we need to do in such a situation? James 4:6 gives us the answer. *"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*" Don't insist on getting your way all the time because those little disconnects, communicated or not, can gnaw away at the framework of your marriage and it's not worth it. Some conflict is totally unnecessary. However, sometimes there are legitimate, sinful offenses that we must learn to respond properly too.

## **II. RESPONDING TO OFFENSES. (Eph. 4:25-5:2)**

Whenever I think about caring for any relationship, I think of **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**. It's a must-turn-to passage for conflict resolution and prevention. In chapters 1-3 Paul has already described all of the heavenly positional riches that have been lavished on us in Christ. We are eternally secure and forgiven and loved children of God. But in chapter 4:1 he's transitioning from doctrine to duty, faith to practice. He exhorts us to **walk in a manner worthy of Christ**. Because we have also been given new power in us by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:20), we are to put off the sinful ways of the old man we were before Christ and put on the new, righteous, set apart man in Christ.

*25 Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity. 28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. 29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. 30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."* Now, we I just want to pull out a few principles out of this regarding conflict prevention and resolution:

### Care Response #2 – Be wise with words.

Verse 25 says to lay aside the raggedy, useless garments of falsehood or lying and put on **truth**. Lying destroys relationships. You can't trust liars and without trust, there's no oneness. Truth-tellers build trust and increase transparency and oneness. Verse 28 also says to choose words carefully. Don't use unwholesome words – words that are rotten and cause decay and suck the life out of relationships. Instead, use words that **build up** and bring life. And to watch your tone: be **gracious**. I tell every couple to remove the universal threats of “*you always*” or “*you never*” from their words. There is a correlation between our words and our relationships. Imagine how many marriages would be saved if they were just wiser with their tongues. James says the tongue is a small spark but that's all it takes to start a forest fire (James 3:5-12).

### Care Response #3 – Keep short accounts.

In our pride, we want to prolong our anger with the hope of punishing someone who has offended us. Deep down, you know you want to strain out every last drop of justice they deserve. But Paul says those set apart in Christ will **bury the offense ASAP**. “*Don't let the sun go down on your anger.*” If there's an issue, deal with it immediately because if you don't, and you let that anger creep into the garden of your marriage, you might just have an infestation on your hands that's very difficult to get rid of or will cause a lot of damage. Paul says you'll **give the devil a foothold** from which to trip you up in your life – and he only needs one little pinky toe! In the same context of forgiveness in 2 Corinthians, Paul says we don't want to be ignorant of his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11).

Unforgiveness spreads the **evil infestations** of bitterness, resentment, vengeance, hatred, ungratefulness, depression, and despair. While forgiveness deflects pride, shows mercy, restores joy, and revitalizes relationships, unforgiveness is spiritually debilitating. It is an invasive pest that will spread prolifically, sucking the life and joy out of your thoughts and relationships, and gnawing away at your spiritual and physical vitality. I've heard 2 counselors say recently that nearly all personal problems are related in some way to the issue of forgiveness. Most peoples' troubles would be solved or significantly diminished if they just understood what the Bible says about it.<sup>5</sup> Unforgiveness will also invoke **divine parental discipline from our Heavenly Father** (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:34).

Remember when Peter asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive his brother and quantified it by asking if 7 times was enough? In Jesus' day it was customary in the rabbinical teaching to set the threshold of forgiving to 3 times based on obscure Old Testament verses (Amos 2:4). After 3 times, they said you didn't have to forgive that person anymore. So, by suggesting 7 times Peter thought he was being incredibly generous (Matt. 18:21-22)! Jesus said to **forgive 70x7**, which means **you don't keep count or set limits!** You forgive because you are commanded too. You forgive as God has forgiven you: generously, eagerly, totally, lavishly (Luke 15:22-24).

Jesus shared an infamous story to drive His point home to Peter. He told about a king who forgave one of his slaves' trillion-dollar debt and then that same slave turned around and went to a fellow slave who owed him not even a fraction of that and refused to forgive the debt! In response, the king said, *"You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I have had mercy on you? And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."* Back then, they had such a thing as a debtors' prison. The debtor was imprisoned and given some labor to do until they worked to pay back what they owed.<sup>6</sup> The prison is a picture of what happens to an unforgiving Christian. The torturers are the rod of God's Fatherly discipline of His children who after being forgiven an unthinkable amount, refuse to forgive others. It's a sin not to forgive. Something to be repented of so that fellowship with God can be restored.

I've been studying this topic a lot lately, trying to find some systematic teaching on it so we can think clearly about it. And I've found it helpful to think of forgiveness in 2 ways: **covering** and **confronting**.

#### **Care Response #4 - Cover an offense with unconditional, unilateral forgiveness.**

We could call the first one "**overlooking**" or "**covering**," where we overlook petty offenses (Micah 7:8). This is an **unconditional, unilateral forgiveness**, meaning it only involves one person and there are no conditions that must be met to forgive. There is no confrontation. This is immediate forgiveness **from the heart** without ever even bringing it up and this is the forgiveness we exercise the most. When someone offends you, you just get a shovel, dig a hole, throw the offense in the hole, and bury it – you cover it up. You bury the hatchet and don't leave the handle sticking out. It's done. Full and complete forgiveness. **Like Christ who gave us an example to follow in His steps, you just absorb the injustice or suffering** like He did (1 Pet. 2:18-25).

I've learned that Bible teachers who define forgiveness as a 2-way, interpersonal transaction tend to make a distinction between covering and forgiving. They acknowledge we should overlook petty offenses, but that's not the same as forgiving. Well, I've got a few verses here where the Bible equates covering with forgiving. **Psalm 32:1** says, *"How blessed is he who transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."* In the Hebrew parallel there, transgression parallels sin and forgiven parallels covered. **Psalm 85:2** says, *"You forgave the iniquity of Your people; You covered all their sins."* Forgave and covered are equated. So when **1 Peter 4:8** says, *"Love covers a multitude of sins,"* it is talking about forgiveness. Proverbs says *"A man's good sense makes him slow to wrath, and the overlooking of wrongdoing is his glory."* So forgivers are good lovers and they're wise. Love buries offenses and burns the map to location. It keeps no record of wrongs and doesn't demand payment (1 Cor. 13:5-7).

**Mark 11:25-26** I think also speaks of this type of forgiveness. *"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive"*

*your transgressions.*” Notice the immediacy required there – “*while you stand praying ... forgive*”. Just picture a man getting ready for his devotional time: he has his Bible in front of him, coffee cup in hand, and he goes to pray but he still has a grudge against someone.<sup>7</sup> God says **release** the grudge if you really want fellowship with Him. Let go of it before you continue.

If every offense required an interpersonal confrontation, that would become very wearying, very fast. We would be doing little else but confronting one another for petty grievances. This is why defining forgiveness only as a 2-way transaction would be I think a potentially disastrous mistake. It can produce more conflict than it avoids (stirring up strife), makes for tedious (annoying) relationships, and is virtually impossible. The **chief effect** of this type of unconditional, unilateral forgiveness is what it does in the heart of the forgiver<sup>8</sup> – setting it **free** from grudges and restoring **fellowship** with God.

However, there are clearly times when it’s helpful to think of forgiveness as something **conditional<sup>9</sup> and bilateral**, more like a formal transaction between 2 people where forgiveness is both sought out and granted.

#### **Response #5 – Confront an offense by seeking and granting forgiveness.**

Luke 17:3-4 says, “*If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.*” This verse reminds me of the reconciliatory process our parents raised us with. “*Now what do you say?*” ... “*I am sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me. I love you.*”<sup>10</sup> For some reason, when we grow up, we forget to do that because it’s hard. But those **12 words** are a lethal pesticide to many pests trying to suck the vitality out of any relationship. If you’ve offended someone, it’s proper for you to go to them with an apology and ask for forgiveness. It’s ideal for the offended party to know you’ve repented so they can grant formal forgiveness and for the offender to know they’ve also been granted forgiveness by the offended.

***When is this kind of forgiveness necessary?*** Outside of the whole church discipline topic that we aren’t getting into today, I would say whenever you just know it’s necessary. If there’s a heated exchange followed by an icy silence,<sup>11</sup> ideally there should be a formal exchange of forgiveness. Or if there’s a breach in a relationship’s oneness that isn’t going away or maybe some repeated sin or destructive habit or tendencies keeps causing a breach, it needs formally addressed. But before you go to confront someone who offended you:

- Ask, “*Is it worth it? Can I just let it go?*” or “*Did I contribute to it? Do I need to repent?*”
- Check your motives. Am I seeking to retaliate or restore? Punish or pursue peace?
- Pray about it. Forgive from the heart first.
- Find about the proper time to address it.
- Speak soft and slow (Prov. 15:1). Speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:29). Try to affirm something they do well before rebuking (See Jesus’ approach in Rev. 2:2-5; 13-16; 19-20).
- Watch your body language. Relax.

- Make it mutual. Verbally, openly, and humbly admit your faults and seek each other's full forgiveness. God honors such genuine repentance.<sup>12</sup>

***What if you confront and there is no repentance? Or you aren't sure if it's genuine?*** I still think you are required to forgive from the heart even if formal reconciliation doesn't take place. And keep praying for them and for yourself to have a tender heart towards them.

***What about justice?*** That's a question I've wrestled with. I love justice. My name is *Justin*. I want to promote true justice in the world and not this fake social justice. There's nothing wrong with desiring justice to be carried out. But I think we've got to come to grips with the fact that some justices will just never be made right this side of eternity and it's our duty as Christ-followers to suffer wrongs gracefully like Jesus did. Doing so is very winsome. Like Jesus or Steven, we say, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). Instead of insisting on the right being made wrong, Robert Jones in his book *Uprooting Anger* says, "*We must learn to let Him be the lawgiver, recorder, witness, prosecutor, judge, and executioner. He calls us to trust in His perfect justice.*"<sup>13</sup> In time, He will right the wrongs.

I know I keep using stories from the *Art of Marriage*, but I can't help it because it's so good! In this week's session there is the testimony a couple named Tony and Venita. In a dark time of depression, Venita did some things to really hurt Tony. For a year and a half, they tried moving on but it just wasn't working. Ever since Venita hurt Tony, everything was always her fault, her weakness, and her selfishness. She was always the problem and felt like she had no voice anymore. Obviously, this caused her to shut down and disconnect. About that time, Tony goes to a men's retreat where God hits him with a 2x4, saying yes, she screwed up, but you can't blame everything on your wife anymore. So he said, "*Venita, I forgive you for some painful things that have happened. I'm sorry that my pain has turned into anger and that I've abandoned my responsibilities to love you and nurture you and help you learn how to love me. Please help me change to love you unconditionally and to nurture you and teach you in a tender manner as my responsibility requires. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize this. Will you forgive me?*" You see what happened? The marriage wasn't healing without a mutual repentance and forgiveness that set her free from the guilt shutting her down and the bitterness in his heart. It's a beautiful story about a marriage garden that rebounded after they dealt with the pests eating away at them.

**Challenge:** If there's any past or present offense causing a breach in the oneness of your marriage, deal with it. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Release the grudge in your heart and formally between the two of you if you have too. Kill the pests!

<sup>1</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 105; 115.

<sup>2</sup> *The Art of Marriage Small Group Series Workbook* citing *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "hedonism." (Litte Rock, AR: Family Life Publishing, 2012), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Arnn, *Hillsdale College Podcast, Dialogues 06-17-22: Introduction to Aristotle's Ethics: How to Lead a Good Life, Part I*, accessed 7/23/2022.

<sup>4</sup> *The Art of Marriage: Love Interrupted* video.

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

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<sup>7</sup> Costi Hinn & Matt Shackleford, *For the Gospel Podcast: How to Break the Patterns of Bitterness*, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/for-the-gospel-podcast/id1537872799?i=1000550294216>

<sup>8</sup> MacArthur, 122.

<sup>9</sup> Hinn.

<sup>10</sup> Swindoll, 99.

<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, 132.

<sup>12</sup> Swindoll, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Jones, *Uprooting Anger*.