



Devotions Week Three

The final component of this week's lesson is a Bible study that enhances the big ideas from the video. There are five days of devotions to be completed during the week. Researchers found that couples who read the Bible and pray together daily have a nearly 100% success rate for their marriages, so we believe that developing that habit is non-negotiable.

If you already are involved in a daily study that includes reading passages from the Bible, please don't feel it is necessary to put that one on hold - these devotions are available to you as an option. The part that is not an option for a successful marriage is doing some form of daily Bible reading and study together.

Day One

Read Solomon 2:15

This very short reading today is the motivation behind most of the work we must do in our marriages. We all need to constantly work toward ridding our marriages and lives of the little foxes that would ruin them. Why the image of foxes? Let's think about that for a minute.

Consider the appearance, defenses, and habits of foxes. They are small creatures, about the size of a full-grown house cat, who aren't known for their fierceness. Because of this, we tend to not be afraid of them; in fact, it's easy to be a bit intrigued with this wild animal that will show little fear of humans. It isn't uncommon for them to sit down to watch you approach them or to go about their business while ignoring you. In fact unless you try to chase them away, they are perfectly content to just hang around. But when you do want to eliminate them, a quick Internet search revealed that foxes tend to run away when

confronted rather than to stay and fight. Their teeth are their only defense, but are rarely known to bite people. Instead, those teeth are put to use eating the garden you are nurturing for your own consumption. One aspect of foxes that make them a worthy opponent is their ability to conform their habits to blend into the life that is going on around them. They will change their behavior patterns to be able to adapt to the surroundings in which they find themselves.

Isn't that just how it is with sin too? It often doesn't start off by looking terrible sinister or threatening, and often has an element that intrigues you. Because you aren't seeing any specific threat to yourself, you become accustomed to it hanging around. Your presence doesn't scare it off, but pretty soon you realize that seemingly innocent thing has devoured the relationship that you have been nurturing.

The flip side is that sin, just like foxes, will flee when you pursue it. That isn't to say that it will stay gone, just like foxes, sin will circle back around and try to be allowed to remain; however, when you are actively searching it out, it will run away. The trouble comes in when we think that everything is okay and we can let our guards down. Sin, like foxes, will take advantage of any opportunity to destroy what you are trying to build.

Discussion Questions

- What are the two or three things that keep trying to attack your relationship? What can you do to keep an eye out for them? How have you chased them away in the past?
- Think about the foxes that are sneaking into your garden. Rank them in order from the fattest (the one having done the most damage) to the thinnest (the newest or less prevalent.) Don't be afraid to call them what they are; until you can name them you have no chance of eliminating them.

Close your time by praying together. You may pray on your own or use this one as a model:

Lord, help us to see those sins that keep lurking in our marriage. Help us to chase them out of our lives so we can protect our relationship. Give us the determination and perseverance to continue to fight for each other. In Your Son's Name we pray. Amen.

Day Two

Read Ephesians 4:25-32

The prophet Zechariah first spoke the words at the beginning of this reading as he was telling of the return of Jerusalem. Zechariah 8:16-17 reads, “These are the things you shall do: speak each man the truth to his neighbor; give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace; let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; and do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.” Paul is reminding the Ephesians of this expectation, then goes on to expand on its meaning.

We are to do everything in our power to live rightly with one another. Paul is speaking about Christians as a whole; how much more that applies to our spouses! Look at the list of what to do and you decide if you think any of them are bad ideas for your relationship:

- Tell the truth and don’t put on airs
- It’s okay to be angry, but not okay to seek revenge
- Forgive quickly so the devil doesn’t get a foothold
- Make the changes you need to make right now start doing what is right
- Use words to build each other up, not to tear each other down
- Remember that you are God’s child and He is living in you
- Get rid of degrading, backbiting, and profane speaking
- Be gentle, sensitive, and forgiving

The first directive given is to tell the truth. That is absolutely important because without the truth you have no relationship; however, the truth without love can be abusive. We need to remember that everything we do and say to each other needs to be wrapped in a blanket of love. That includes how we are honest with each other. We need to always remember that our words have the power to heal or the power to kill. Paul spells that out for us later in the reading: we are to use words that build up, are gentle, sensitive, and forgiving; we are to avoid tearing each other down, and using degrading, backbiting, or profane language. Clear communication requires us to speak to each other the way God intended.

The next directive is about forgiveness. I find it interesting that forgiving quickly prevents the devil from gaining an advantage in your life. If we hold on to anger and allow it

to harden into bitterness for the other person, we have allowed the devil to enter into our relationship and have given him the master bedroom. Nothing about the way that Jesus lived showed us that it was okay to live in a spirit of unforgiveness. We need to be sure to ask for and to extend forgiveness as quickly as possible. A good marriage needs two good forgivers.

Discussion Questions

- Which trait is the most difficult for each of you to live?
 - Honesty
 - Humility
 - Forgiveness
 - Building each other up
 - Treating your body as God's temple
 - Giving up bad, hurtful language
 - Being gentle and sensitive to other's needs
- Which trait comes the most naturally to each of you?
- What is one thing each of you can do to encourage and help the other become more successful at using his or her words to heal rather than to hurt?

Close your time by praying together. You may pray on your own or use this one as a model:

God, thank You for giving us voices to raise in prayer and praise to You. Help us to use those same voices to build each other up. Let our words be used to heal rather than to hurt one another. Keep a guard on our lips and make us mindful of how we sound to each other. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

Day Three

Read John 1:14-17

Yesterday you read about the directives Paul gave to tell the truth and offer forgiveness; today's reading is focused around the themes of truth and grace. You may be wondering why so many passages in the Bible deal with the importance of telling the truth. It is because

truth is the basis for all relationships. Did you know that the devil is sometimes referred to as the master of lies or the master of deceit? That is because dishonesty destroys relationships, and that is exactly what he wants to have happen. God designed us to live in relationship with Himself and others; Satan wants to derail that. The facts are that sin can't hide in the light of complete truth, and forgiveness allows us to heal from the effects of sin. That's a pretty powerful one-two punch.

Grace is a word that I have always struggled with grasping the definition of. Some churches have a little acrostic poem to help people remember that grace is:

God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense

That is all good, but it still didn't help me understand what the real meaning of grace is. Merriam-Webster isn't much more help with their multi-part definition:

- a** : unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification
- b** : a virtue coming from God
- c** : a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine grace

Finally, I found this explanation: grace is God blessing us despite the fact that we do not deserve it; grace is extending kindness to the unworthy. Now we are getting somewhere with an explanation I can wrestle with.

We are to try to live our lives patterned after Christ. We have received grace from Him, so we are to extend grace to others. That would be pretty easy to do if grace was served up like gravy at a fancy dinner with everyone on his or her best behavior. The problem is that grace is to be given when it isn't deserved, to the unworthy. As a human, that's a bit of a challenge for me because at some level I feel that grace from me must be earned. I kind of like the sense of power that controlling that gives me. The problem is that I'm not called to live like that - I am called to extend grace the way that Jesus did, to the undeserving and unworthy. That means you don't earn grace; it is a gift that is given at a time that it is needed most.

Refusing grace (to bless others or to extend kindness) and refusing to forgive (to cancel

the debt of sin) doesn't fit with God's will. You may need to consider where you are in this.

Discussion Questions

- Are you holding onto grace or are you willing to extend it to your spouse lavishly?
- Is the fear of lack of grace and forgiveness preventing you from exposing any lies in your life? How can you make that safe for each other?
- What are you motivated by: the fear of punishment or the celebration of forgiveness? Just a thought for your discussion, the Bible tells us in 1 John 4:18 that perfect love drives out fear.

Close your time by praying together. You may pray on your own or use this one as a model:
 Jesus, thank You for coming to show us Your grace and truth. Help us to model that to each other. Open our hearts to extend grace and forgiveness without requiring the other to earn it. Strengthen us to live according to Your model. Make us more like You each day. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

Day Four

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

This is a pretty common chunk of scripture, but sometimes I think that we tend to gloss over things that are familiar with the assumption that we've got all the information from that part. When you dive deeply into reading and meditating, you find that there is always something new and unexpected waiting for you. The first thing to remember is that we don't craft these for ourselves; we simply go to God to get the things that He designed and created. Because He made them, you can rest assured that they are of the highest quality.

I find the association of the gifts God gives to the actual piece of armor to be interesting. You can tell how intentional Paul was when he was describing it, but it probably made a little more sense to the Ephesians than it does to most of us. After all, they were a lot more familiar with how armor worked than most of us are today.

- Truth - This is referred to as the belt. The significance here is that all the other pieces of armor were attached to the belt, so it is foundational to everything else. I'd say

that's how it is with truth - unless everything else is built on a bed of truth, you have a shaky platform. You may not see it displayed in isolation, but you see how it affects everything else.

- Righteousness - This is the breastplate, which is actually the part that I usually the first part I picture when I think of armor. It is thick and has the job of protecting the most important organs; without it the soldier is a sitting duck. Right living in God's eyes (the definition of righteousness) protects us from attack because we are constantly focused on making the right choices. When we have our eyes fastened on the right things, we are less prone to be distracted by the wrong things.
- Peace - This gift is assigned to the feet, not because it is less important, but because everywhere we go we should leave our footprint - and that footprint should be peace. The Bible tells us that as much as we are able, we should live in peace with all men. That doesn't mean roll over and play dead - it means that you should try to live in a manner that promotes relationship rather than discord.
- Faith - Faith is shown as a shield, which is appropriate if you think about how maneuverable a shield is. The shield is the deflection point of many attacks. The Merriam-Webster dictionary has an interesting definition for faith that expands a little for me; they define faith as a belief and truth in and loyalty to God. The loyalty part speaks loudly to me - if we are loyal to God we are living in a way that says, "Get away," to any worldly activity. Talk about your ultimate deflection tool!
- Salvation - The helmet is representative of salvation. Salvation is the ultimate gift that we can't survive without. Salvation was the work that Jesus did by coming to earth, dying for our sins, and then defeating death through His resurrection; because of His sacrifice we are able to live with the assurance that we will live with God in heaven. Regardless of the attacks that we go through in our life on earth, if we accept His free gift of salvation, we are guaranteed that our faith in Him will bring us to eternal protection.
- God's Word - This is referred to as the Sword of the Spirit. That would be our offensive weaponry. God's Word, His Spirit allows us to strike back at the enemy. Satan can't stand up to God - he has already been defeated through Jesus's death and resurrection. We can confidently proclaim God's truth and know that it will not falter.

Discussion Questions

- Which piece of armor is it the most difficult for each of you to put on? Why do you struggle with that?
- We are told that our battle isn't against people, but against Satan (the spiritual forces of evil.) How are you being attacked as a couple? Which piece of armor do you need to counter with? Those pieces may not be the same for each of you. How can you be each other's armor bearer?
- Identify one thing your spouse can pray for you. Which do you need help getting into: truth, right living, peace, faith, security of your salvation, relying on God's Word?

Close your time by praying together. You may pray on your own or use this one as a model:

God, You instructed us to pray in the Spirit, in Your Word. We are asking now that You protect all of Your people from the attacks that Satan is launching. Help us to stand in Your truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. Open our hearts and minds to Your Word so each day we have a deeper understanding of whom You are and what You are wanting to accomplish through us. Unify us so we can work together. Thank You for providing the way for our salvation. In Your Son's precious Name we pray. Amen.

Day Five

Read John 14:6

To set the stage, at the point in time of the passage, Jesus is having His last supper with the disciples. He knows what is going to happen, and He's trying to do a final prep for everyone. He has demonstrated the power of servant hood by washing their feet, given them a specific commandment that summarizes everything He had been trying to teach them . . . love one another as I have loved you . . ., has identified Judas and predicted Peter's denials.

At that same meal, He is telling them that He is going to prepare a place for them. Thomas points out what he thinks Jesus might be missing - that they don't know where He's going, so they won't know where to find Him. I love Thomas because he is so concrete with everything, just like I tend to be. The disciples still aren't grasping what Jesus is trying to tell them about His death and resurrection, but you can't really blame them. We have the

benefit of having the whole story; for them it was unfolding one page at a time. So Thomas does what I'd probably do and comes right out to ask for clarification.

Jesus probably doesn't help him too much with His answer. He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Now we have the benefit of being able to see this answer in light of the whole salvation story, but the disciples only had the information up to this point. I wonder how I would have reacted; would I have "gotten" what Jesus was saying or would I have just nodded and tried to look wise at this point. I'm thinking I would have been pretty clueless because I have the whole story and I still tend to complicate matters when it is all quite simple.

There isn't some complex formula of dos and don'ts, rights and wrongs, and prayers with the right words. Jesus came to abolish the hypocrisy of a works-based faith. Jesus is all we need to know, He was here from the beginning, is with us now, and will be here forever. He did the work we couldn't do to earn salvation for us. We have been redeemed through His sacrifice; all we have to do is claim that prize through faith in Him. We don't have to jump through man-made hoops and hope to be good enough; He is the map we need to plan our journey, the directional signs to verify our accurate travel down road, and the welcoming committee when we arrive at our final destination. He will guide us and is the only one who can accurately get us to where we need to go; all other ways end in death. All we have to do is follow Him.

Discussion Questions

- Do you put more trust in yourself and your solutions, or in God and His solutions?
- What is the most difficult thing for you to give to God? Why do you think that is?
- What areas are you veering from His pathway? How can you do a course correction and get back on-track?

Close your time by praying together. You may pray on your own or use this one as a model:

Jesus, thank You for showing us the way we are supposed to be going. Convict us when we are straying from Your path. Keep us from trying to make our own way. Help us to look to You for the map, help us trust Your Word, and help us rely on You for guidance. In Your name we pray. Amen