The Belts of Christianity

(Spiritual Warfare as a Martial Art)

(Master Pastor Levels of Discipline)

Premise:

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is the Grandmaster of the Martial Art of Christianity.

“—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords”

Scriptural Passage (1 Timothy 6):

1 All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and *our* doctrine will not be spoken against. 2 Those who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but must serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these *principle*s.

3 If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, 4 he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.

6 But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. 7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

17 Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. *18 Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. 20 O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly *and* empty chatter *and* the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge”— 21 which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you.

Intimacy with God – extracted from “Marriage By God’s Design”

God is absolutely perfect in character, behavior, motivation, etc., so it is appropriate for the Bible to exhort us to be like Him (Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect”). If we examine the elements of intimacy we looked at before, we can see that God is exceedingly intimate toward us. We need to grow in our intimacy with Him. That is why our spiritual maturity and the intimacy we experience with God are in correspondence with each other, and it is why the things we do to build our spiritual maturity also build intimacy in our marriages.

* Trust (encompassing vulnerability) (See Genesis 18:17; John 15:15; John 11:35, “Jesus wept.”). God did not withhold the pending judgment against Sodom from Abraham, knowing that he would be concerned for Lot, his nephew. Jesus tells us that He was faithful to tell us what He heard from the Father. Yes, there are lots of things God does not reveal to us, but largely because we need to live by faith in order to grow…it is for our good. The thought of our Creator weeping over us, feeling compassion and being greatly moved in heart can move us to awe. The Bible is filled with expressions of God’s emotions and His willingness to express them in the presence of those who believe, i.e., His willingness to be vulnerable with His people.
* Communications (especially the willingness to listen to each other; as exemplified by prayer in our relationship with God – “Pray without ceasing.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17). All effective prayer is to be accomplished in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14; 15:7-8, 16) which is to say in submission to His authority. Therefore, prayer is always initiated by God. Of course, much of God’s communication with us may be non-verbal, being administered by the Spirit of Christ moving in our hearts, but our response by faith is also essential.
* Truthfulness (Vulnerability/openness/truth with each other). (John 14:6; John 1:9-11) Jesus is the very personification of truth, yet he was willing to suffer rejection when He spoke the truth, convicting those religious leaders who opposed Him. He did not hide the truth in order to be accepted.
* Love (true love by Biblical standards that includes the willingness to put the other’s interests above one’s own, to make sacrifices (even unto death) in order to meet each other’s needs, and to put the value of the relationship above whatever hurts comes because of it) (John 3:16; Ephesians 5:25-27; 1 John 4:7-8)
  + Respecting of the other’s individuality and personhood (Colossians 3:10-11)
* Grace expressed in action (tolerance for faults, forgiveness for errors, etc.). Forgiveness and grace always extended to the other. Ephesians 2:1-10 makes it clear the extent to which Christ extends His grace to us and He has never done any unrighteousness so as to need forgiveness from us…except when we unrighteously get upset with God not allowing us to have our way.
* Mutual submission to Christ and willingness to work together to resolve life’s challenges. (Christ does not need to submit to Himself; He is Lord. He is the One working things out for our good (Romans 8:28).)
* Service/attitude of dependence on each other/gratitude for each other. (John 15:1-17)
* Joy in each other’s company. (John 15:11)
* Seeking unity of purpose. (John 17; 15:10)
* Faithfulness (fidelity) to each other. (2 Timothy 2:13)
* Integrity (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Is there any way in which God has not fulfilled intimacy toward us? The answer is clearly “no”; He is perfect toward us. So how can we build intimacy within our marriage by following His example? One of the most powerful answers in the Bible is to become fully intimate with God, and we will automatically build intimacy with each other through the transforming work of the Spirit of Christ at work within us.

We should be careful not to deceive ourselves. We, every one of us, fall desperately far short of the ideal of God’s perfection. It is one thing to grow in a relationship with a perfect God, and another thing to grow in relationship with a fellow imperfect person.

## Our Relationship with God – the Color Belts of Christianity

The Bible provides a number of examples of human relationships with God. Since God uses marriage as a pattern for our relationship with Him, and vice versa, these examples are useful for us to see how to promote healthier marriages. Our spiritual maturity is equivalent to intimacy with God, so Biblical models illustrating how to grow spiritually can be instructive to how to build our marriage. There are at least 8 models of spiritual relationship with God:

* Sheep (He is the Good Shepard) (John 10; Psalm 23)
* Servant (He is the Good Master or Lord)
* Subject (He is the King of kings; Sovereign of all Creation) (Deuteronomy 6)
* Soldier (He is the Captain of the Hosts of the Lord (General of generals)) (2 Timothy, especially chapter 2; Joshua 5:13-15; Ephesians 6:10-20)
* Branch (He is the Vine) (John 15)
* Member of the Congregation of God; People of His possession (Psalm 74)
* Friend of Christ (John 15)
* Bride of Christ (Isaiah 61:10; 62:5; Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9; 22:17)
* Children of God (and co-inheritors with Christ) (Romans 8)

Each of these models has a variety of examples in the Bible that emphasize different aspects of intimacy with God. The models picture God/Christ as the perfect groom and each of us as (imperfect) brides being perfected by Christ, and our marriages consist of imperfect brides and grooms. Therefore, the models are not precisely equivalent, but we can still extract principles that are useful.

I believe that the different models are somewhat hierarchical in an order approximating the list above. The character manifested and the skills learned at each level are foundational to growing toward the next level of intimacy (spiritual maturity in the case of our relationship with God in Christ Jesus). If for some reason, a trait of a lower level of intimacy is forgotten or lost, the relationship will regress until the trait is reestablished. Also, you cannot achieve a high level of intimacy until all of the foundational characteristics of the lower levels are in place. This implies that a couple can systematically (intentionally) build their relationship. As our relationship with God illustrates, both individuals in the marriage do not achieve intimacy at the same rate or time. If each individual does their part and loves the other, the other will come along in good time.

Note that the primary difference between our spiritual growth and our growth in marital intimacy is the need for us to accommodate sin in our lives. God has already done that in His relationship toward us. This is true of each of the models that follow.

### Sheep – Proven to be Trustworthy

Domesticated sheep are incredibly fearful and stupid. They have been known to be taken to a pasture and left there where they ate the grass down to the ground and then starved rather than finding another green pasture merely over the next hill. We are also stupid whenever we sin because the Law of God reflects His design for our lives. Every departure from His will is harmful to us, so it is insane to sin. (But we do continue to sin.)

Sheep identify with each other through smell (since otherwise they all look pretty much alike). The image of the shepherd anointing the head of the sheep with oil is taken from an ancient practice. Shepherds would each mix their own anointing oil containing a unique perfume. By anointing each of their flock with this oil, the sheep of the flock would know that they belonged to each other. They shepherd would also put the perfume on the back of his legs so the sheep would follow him. The perfume would overcome any natural odors, so even a newly acquired sheep would be quickly integrated into the flock using this practice.

Domestic sheep **develop** great trust and dependence on the good shepherd for their food, water, defense, and all other needs. The trust grows with time and the repeated trustworthiness of the shepherd. Still, sheep can be prone to straying off, especially if frightened into getting separated from the flock. (If they are outside of aroma range of the flock, they are effectively lost.) The good shepherd pursues the lost and restores them to the flock.

The basic image of sheep and shepherd in relationship is the most fundamental spiritual level of intimacy. It is almost equivalent to a boy and girl as “going steady” or being “BFF”. At the root of the relationship, each individual believes that the other can be trusted to satisfy their spiritual and emotional needs. If this proves to be the fact, a couple might decide to get married, but if not, they will probably break up as a dating couple. In marriage, our marriage vows are intended for us to identify with each other more than with anyone else. Often, a couple will enter their vows with strong intentions to be committed to each other, but without understanding all that their vows mean, even when they have written the vows together.

In John 10, Christ says, “My sheep know My voice and another they will not follow.” Again, it is an image of the ancient practice of the shepherd proceeding to the field singing and the sheep following his voice as well as his scent. We know that **the sheep did not understand** what the shepherd was singing or saying, **they** simply **recognized his voice**. They know his voice sufficiently to follow him without understanding. The anointing oil was important for the sheep until they learned to recognize their shepherd’s voice, which would take some time. This brings the image of a shepherd like David playing music and singing as he leads his sheep to pasture. It also provides an image of the Spirit of Christ speaking to our hearts. There are many misunderstandings in a marriage early on. Marriage vows and mutual joy help keep a newlywed couple together when they encounter the trials of life and until they learn to communicate with each other in a trustworthy manner. When “the honeymoon is over” and life routines settle in, their trust for each other keeps them bound together.

Trust in marriage grows over time as each spouse proves to be **trustworthy**. But we need to be careful to identify what it means to be trustworthy in the marriage relationship context. Examining the elements of intimacy, we see that there are several elements that **must** be continually proven in order to maintain and build trust:

* **Marriage fidelity**. Obviously, sexual infidelity is a direct affront to the marriage vows and tears at the foundation of mutual commitment needed for successful marriage. While infidelity is not insurmountable, it certainly inhibits the building of intimacy and trust. Marriage fidelity extends as well to showing each other love and respect in public and among family and friends. God is always faithful, loving, and respectful, deserving trust.
* **Truthfulness**. Truthfulness is fundamental to trust. God is the very personification of truth. If the communications are not truthful, improvements in communications will be inhibited. Truthfulness also includes the willingness to be vulnerable to each other and to admit to faults in self. If the spouse is not trustworthy to maintain respect and acceptance in the face of faults and admissions of insufficiency, the communications will shut down and intimacy will be arrested at whatever level has been achieved. It is essential that each spouse must continually prove trustworthy to accept their partner in life with all of their faults. This includes not trying to change their spouse, but merely being accepting and willing to help where their partner wants to be helped and in the way they want to be helped. Without this attitude, truthfulness will be discouraged rather than encouraged.
  + Most addicts, alcoholics, and substance abusers are full of self-deception. As a result, they have a really difficult time admitting to their addiction and need for help. People who love an addict (especially a spouse or parent) need to be careful to not become co-dependent, that is, a person who encourages an addict to stay in their addiction by trying to overtly continuing to express love and forgiveness while hiding the truth of their addiction. It is especially important for the spouse of an addict/alcoholic to speak and behave truthfully and to let the addict bear the consequences of their addictions directly and without being repeatedly rescued. It is often necessary for the spouse of an addict/alcoholic to obtain help to prevent them from being co-dependent.
* **Demonstrating grace**. Just as God demonstrates His grace and forgiveness over and over toward us, each spouse must prove to be trustworthy to demonstrate grace and forgiveness even in cases of repeated offenses. However, this does not prevent expressing displeasure (gracefully) or allowing the other to bear consequences of bad behaviors. If a person repeatedly sins in a particular way, the spouse needs to be able to forgive repeatedly. Recognizing that none of us are God, we lack the capacity to repeatedly forgive without help, especially from God. However, there may also need for professional help when the sin is one of abuse that is so extreme as to be dangerous.
* **Communication**. We learn the ‘voice of Christ’ through the Spirit of Christ and through the Bible. Christ reveals Himself in the Bible, and the Spirit of Christ communicates continually with us in our hearts, which resonate with the Bible. In marriage, each spouse must continually reaffirm love and respect and ensure that the communication is being received by their partner. In the typical romance during the courtship phase, they would freely make such expressions. In marriage, it is important to maintain, or even increase, these expressions. Of course, a repeated “I love you” is hollow if it is not accompanied by demonstrations of love and respect. In addition, many new couples still need to learn the nuances of communicating with each other. For instance, men tend to communicate to men differently from how women communicate with women. Men often use many physical gestures differently from women, so a new couple needs to develop an understanding of each other’s body language and even develop their own. Sheep may know the voice and follow the tone of the voice without understanding what is really being said. Similarly, new couples need to diligently seek to understand each other.
* **Other parts of intimacy**. Serving each other’s needs, seeking to achieve mutual goals, demonstrating integrity, maintaining fidelity, etc. are all areas that need to be built upon. In the beginning of the relationship, it is important to be consistent in each of these areas and open to making changes to enhance each area. Many of these aspects of intimacy are not overtly obvious except over time, so trustworthiness is expressed in “improving consistently” by building an attitude of seeking to know each other better and to please each other.

New couples usually enjoy each other’s company, but in limited ways (similar to sheep identifying each other primarily through smell). New couples need to work with each other to expand the horizons of their **joy** together. This is a challenge as the couple is just defining how they will face life’s challenges together and fulfill their responsibilities. Communicating well overcomes many of these difficulties, but poor communications may also rob the couple of their mutual enjoyment and undermine their commitment to each other. Just as the Bible tells us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4), a couple needs to rejoice in each other’s company.

God acts in perfect character toward us all of the time and is fully trustworthy. Psalm 23 [RST Psalm 22] demonstrates the trust of a spiritual sheep in the Good Shepard described in John 10. If we act in a Godly manner toward each other, we will be trustworthy in each other’s eyes. God always acts in a new believer’s life to provide protection and guidance. The believer must respond in loving gratitude and awe in order to experience growth in his spiritual relationship with God. The believer needs to actively seek to grow spiritually, receive discipleship, and enter into fellowship with other believers in order to be part of God’s flock. The believer matures as part of the flock, but needs to internalize that sense of belonging in order to grow in trusting God rather than merely becoming a religious sheep.

An immature relationship is often characterized by enjoyment of each other’s company because of shared interests. This is fine for starting a relationship, but the tests of a marriage come when there are trials. The couple must identify mutual goals that transcend personal delights and focus on facing the difficulties of life in unity with each other.

**Building unity of purpose** is potentially challenging for new couples. If their relationship is like sheep, they are more self-centered than marriage-centered. This leads to focusing on self-gratification rather than seeking to satisfy each other. Like 2 pieces of paper freshly stuck together, they can easily part while the glue is wet. The relationship needs to move rapidly beyond this initial relationship phase in order to cement the marriage.

Married couples need to **belong to each other**, not merely enjoy associating with each other.

### Servant/Slave – Role Recognition

It is fundamental to our spiritual growth to acknowledge Jesus as **Lord** (master) of our life. The Bible tells us much about how we are to be faithful servants of our Lord. Jesus tells several parables about this. The servant relationship is described in the Law and is used by each of the Apostles of themselves.

The image is one of a slave who has served their time under their master and is to be set free in the year of Jubilee (see Exodus 21:1-11 and Leviticus 25:47-55). However, they have an excellent master who provides for their care well, is righteous, just, and fair, so they decide to become a permanent slave of their master. Under the Law, they put their earlobe to the doorpost and the master would pierce their ear and give them an identification earring, so they are permanently identified as the master’s property. As a bondslave (‘doulos’ in Greek), they are able to conduct business in the name (authority) of their master. As faithful servants, they are always diligent to be doing their master’s will even if he were on a distant journey and not expected to return immediately. The need of the faithful servant is to know the master’s will and to be diligently obedient in doing his will. Abraham’s servant who went to find a wife for Isaac (Rebekah) showed this kind of loving obedience (Genesis 24).

The bondslave of Christ has chosen to leave slavery to sin and the former things of the world to be a slave of righteousness in the blessed presence of our Creator. The bondslave is **dedicated to doing the will of his Master out of love and gratitude, and desires to honor his Master through his behavior**. The Master has taken full responsibility for the care of His servants. The servants acknowledge His Lordship and authority over them; they commit to do His will. Servants normally have some autonomy in performing their tasks, but a bondslave desires to do the will of the Master down to the minutest detail. This is perfectly modeled for us in Christ Jesus who emptied Himself, took on the form of a bondslave (human), and the showed perfect obedience to the Father even to the point of death on the Cross (shown in Philippians 2). This level of intimacy with God grows as the servant grows in submission to His will, which only does so through gratitude for his Lord’s loving care.

In the marriage relationship, this level of intimacy arises as both husband and wife successfully **leave** their birth family **and cleave** to each other. The leaving of birth family must occur emotionally, if not totally in the physical (in some cultures the newly married couple still lives in close proximity with the birth families, even under the same roof). The cleaving to each other requires each spouse to dedicate themselves to forming their family and resolving how to do the business of daily living. It is a task that they must accomplish mutually, but the husband ought to take a leadership role in making the final decisions. In so doing, he should make the decisions with the attitude of cherishing his wife. (See the Design principles revealed in Ephesians 5 above.) As we have seen, there are many roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled in life. God has left most of these roles and their associated tasks to be determined by the married couple as they see fit to do so. (Please refer to the section on roles and responsibilities above.) **At this level of relationship, each person belongs to the other in heart and mind, not merely physically**. They are identifying with each other as partners in life and are developing some unity in setting goals together.

The parsing of responsibilities is often very strongly guided by family traditions and cultural norms. If the family traditions are followed too strictly, there will be much conflict when the two birth families have had different solutions to the same problems. This is exceedingly common, especially in a nation of cultural diversity like the United States. But problems still arise in relatively uniform, closed cultures. Many of the cultural expectations for husband/wife roles are very strictly defined. If they are followed too closely, the abilities, skills, and passions of each individual are likely to not be full recognized or respected. When each spouse is forced to do tasks that they don’t like to do and in which they lack skills or talent, the result is resentment, dissatisfaction, and stress. In this condition, they may regret getting married, especially if they are forced into the role without choice. Life is full of enough trials and challenges without adding to them.

The wise couple will seek to iron out some of these role and responsibility issues while still in the courtship phase. Certainly, they need to iron out many issues within the first weeks and months of their marriage. They may discuss what they like and dislike about their respective parents’ relationships and how they fulfill them; then they can explore ideas about alternative approaches to life’s problems. Who is going to manage the household budget? It is probably not wise for a person who dislikes balancing a checkbook or doing detail work. If neither person likes a particular task, they may decide some innovative way of accomplishing the task together or by using a tool their parents never considered.

Resolving roles and responsibilities down at the details of daily life is not easy, especially when the couple may be young and not knowledgeable about their own likes and dislikes. Still, the right attitudes help to resolve these issues successfully and with a minimum of conflict. The key to success in this area of marriage resides in several key attitudes of intimacy:

* **Mutual trust**. Early in marriage, trustworthiness has not been demonstrated (at least not in depth), so each person must **decide to trust** the other. Each must attribute to the other the good will of accomplishing the tasks of life together. They have taken marriage vows, but now the practical working out of these vows is needed. In setting mutual goals, there have been some conflicts, but they have overcome the conflicts in a way that preserves the satisfaction they have in each other’s company.
* **Willingness to communicate**. Each partner must feel free to express their likes and dislikes for different tasks. They must also be able to express their skills and passions for work as realistically as possible without fear of lack of acceptance by the other. Of course, this implies that they are communicating with mutual respect. Every servant is diligent to make sure that they don’t misunderstand the commands and requests of their master. If they don’t understand, they immediately seek clarification. It is the same thing in marriage. Each partner must seek clarification when there is the potential for missed communication. There may be differences in dialect or word usages or phrasing requests that can cause misunderstandings. Out of love, each seeks clarification and respectfully responds. We see an example of how the attitude of servant is used to build an attitude of prayer in the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 [RST 1 Kings 3]. Samuel had to learn to hear the voice of the LORD, and Eli taught him how to listen. Samuel’s eagerness to serve opened him to learn how to hear the LORD. Every new believer needs to learn how to pray. The Disciples of Jesus asked Him to teach them to pray, and He responded with, “pray in this way…” (Luke 11:1-13). It is useful for each spouse to help the other in hearing them accurately and in how to communicate requests in ways that are not heard offensively.
* **Willingness to serve**. Each partner must be eagerly willing to serve the other’s needs, but this also applies to helping out in doing each other’s responsibilities, when necessary. This willingness to put the other’s needs ahead of one’s own is a natural expression of love needed to cement the commitment to each other. Early in the relationship (often during courtship), the couple will have an immature infatuation for each other that needs to mature into life-long loving commitment to each other, so their decision to serve each other’s needs is really important for advancing the intimacy of the marriage. Both must be eager to serve each other, which is natural when there is mutual love. However, if only one person is eager to serve, there will be a tendency for the other to exploit this eagerness and abusively dominate the other. If there is such a tendency, the one who is seeking to serve must also communicate that they are not being loved and respected. They should humbly demand mutuality in service.
* **Mutual love and respect**. Regardless of conflicts that may arise, views about how different tasks need to be approached, or how to do the things that are mutually distasteful, each partner needs to have an attitude that affirms their love for each other makes it all worthwhile. In addition, each person’s strengths and weaknesses need to be respected. The willingness to be a ‘doulos’ of each other is born in respect and love.

It is important to recognize that resolving roles and responsibilities is an unending task, especially as the couple establishes a family. There are certain roles that God has ordained, that should be respected, but most responsibilities are wide open. During this phase of the relationship, the husband must assume the role of the Head of the family, yet he must do so in the image of Christ loving the Church…sacrificially, gracefully, respectfully, and lovingly.

### Subject – Seeking to Please & Love

In our relationship with God, we must acknowledge Him as our Creator, King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of gods. Similarly, we must acknowledge that we are not “self-made” or in any way comparable to God. We are in no way equal with God in His glory, purity, justice, love, righteousness, all-knowing, all-powerful, present everywhere, and eternal nature. We need to grow in humility and in seeking to know His will so that we can be obedient to Him and **pleasing in His sight**; we must grow in our submission to Him. This is a big step in spiritual maturity and in our ability to draw near to God.

The transition from a master-slave relationship into a king-subject relationship is not clear-cut. They are similar in underlying attitudes and expressed in part as a matter of degree of submission. However, a distinctive attitude of this level of intimacy is the **acknowledgment that the King has absolute righteous and sovereign authority over His subjects**. As the all-present, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-understanding God, we desire to be pleasing to Him, being fully aware that He is aware of everything we do, say, and think. This is much more difficult than merely doing His will (Master-slave relationship) because it means controlling our thoughts and emotions. If there is a “conflict of opinion”, God wins all of the time; we must play by His rules. It also means that we must submit to the discipline of the King when we err.

This aspect of relationship with God also requires us to choose to love God with our entire being. This is easily said, but very difficult to accomplish, especially with all of the distractions of trying to survive in daily life. We must adopt a new level of trust in order to depend upon the provision of God as our Lord God. Instead of merely being led to green pastures and quiet waters like sheep, we must trust that His word will result in a good outcome in each detail of our lives. The Hebrew Shema starts with Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (or strength).” This total decision to love unreservedly is essential to moving on into a deep relationship with God. In the same way, each spouse must decide to love unreservedly the other in their marriage. This is facilitated best when both husband and wife have learned to love the Lord and both recognize that they are equal subjects to His Lordship. Ephesians 5 emphasizes this aspect of marriage.

In marriage, we are **equals who must cooperate** with each other in seeking wisdom and making wise decisions in the issues of life. (Remember, the woman was taken from the side of the man, not from the head or the foot.) The provision of submission of the wife to the husband is intended by God as a means of resolving conflicts and restoring peace after the husband and wife have exhausted all of their “discussions”. Similarly, the husband needs to exercise his headship with love, grace, and respect for his wife. Their decisions together need to be wise. In the ideal circumstance, they help each other to seek the face of God and to prayerfully receive His wisdom in the issues at hand, but this also requires a level of individual spiritual maturity that greatly exceeds their level of marital maturity.

The key to this level of intimacy is humbly putting aside our personal preconceptions and seeking to reach a mutually pleasing (wise) solution to each problem. The couple truly **seeks to be pleasing to each other in everything**. Their pleasure is not just in a shared sense of humor or physical satisfactions; it is in emotional commitment to each other in solving life’s problems. This intimacy is totally dependent on the trustworthiness and mutual service previously established.

When life issues arise and decisions need to be made, husband and wife need to mutually seek a wise solution. Without humility, one will take the lead and try to impose their wisdom on the other. If both have strong opinions and yet disagree, pride will force one to demean the other in order to win an argument. This does not promote intimacy nor promote pleasure, and it is counter to loving each other. If it does occur, forgiveness needs to take place quickly so that no permanent injury takes place.

Adopting an **attitude of humility** is not merely reducing pride; it is also a series of positive personal decisions to put on attitudes that result in humility. These include realizing that we are not equal to God; therefore:

* We are both subject of the Lord God. (If they lack mutual faith in God, they should at least be humble enough to acknowledge that they do not and cannot control every circumstance of life.)
* We need to seek His wisdom together (lacking mutual faith, at least deciding to seek wisdom together.)
* We do not personally possess every answer.
* The answers we do possess may not be the wisest answers.
* We often lack the personal resources to do what we want to do. We are unable to do the good things we know we need to do and cannot stop doing what we know is wrong. The Apostle Paul reports this same phenomenon in himself in Romans 7.

Each partner needs to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their spouse, appreciating the strengths and not disrespecting the other’s weaknesses, and honestly admit to their own strengths and weaknesses. When both are weak in an area, they may seek advice from an expert (which may include a parent). Talking about these issues is important.

The motivation for humility is seeking the wisest possible solution, which will yield the pleasure of victory over the adversities of life. The pleasure of reaching a solution mutually surpasses that of one arrived at individually. The pleasures of successive wise decisions can truly build ever stronger bonds of intimacy.

Husbands must indeed love their wives and nourish and cherish them in this love so that they are able to become strong helpmates in the marriage. The husband must humble himself and trust his wife to be wise in the things in which she is skilled or where they decide that she should take the lead among all of the mutual tasks of life. In order for a husband to have a Proverbs 31 wife, he must humbly entrust her with freedom to use her skills and industry to achieve the goals they have set together.

In addition to all of this, and probably even more important, both partners need to **seek to please their spouse**. Just as we please God by obeying His will, each spouse seeks to please the other by doing their will. This can be a more challenging task than it sounds at first because one person’s will may conflict with the other’s.

Similarly, each partner needs to learn how to **lovingly and respectfully discipline** the other. Different people respond to discipline in different ways and respond to different methods. A graceful word of correction is appropriate, whereas physical violence is never correct. Good communications skills are useful. If bad behavior is not corrected promptly, it erodes trust and love. Withholding expressions of love, including sex, is not a wise form of discipline. When a graceful word does not work and the circumstance escalates into hot tempers and raised voices, someone needs to be humble enough to stop and initiate reconciliation. They need to express to each other their commitment to the marriage is more important than having their own way. However, bad behavior is still not acceptable, so if it persists, seeking outside counseling is often the wise solution. If the behavior is rooted in birth-family traditions, running back to mother and father is not a solution; counseling assistance should be from a neutral source. The best counsel is from the Bible and from prayerful leading from God Himself.

When conflicts occur, humility is important. Very often it is something more important than a simple, “Honey, will you please take out the garbage?” (However, it is important to comply in order to avoid causing your living quarters to smell bad.) It may be, “Honey will you please go shopping (because something is needed for the meal being prepared for the company that is coming tonight)?” You may need to do it even though it would be so much nicer to relax and watch your favorite sport. The request is both needful and urgent. You need to comply because the greater good (the dinner for guests) is important and part of your mutual goals. The humble attitude allows each to put the mutual need above personal need. This contributes to the greater good and greater mutual pleasure.

To greatly succeed in this level of intimacy, husband and wife need to both recognize Christ as King of their marriage, and they are mutual subjects seeking to do His will. This attitude will help them succeed in the task of worshiping God as well as seeking His wisdom in the minutia of daily living. They will grow together in marital intimacy even if they are not as successful as they would like to be in growing in intimacy with God.

### Soldier – Discipline, Devotion, & Encouragement

The image of a soldier fulfilling the command of his general immediately and completely to the best of his ability is used frequently in the Bible as an image of faithful obedience. This obedience may result in great suffering, hardship and even death, but it is done willingly because of the glory (and authority) of the General and loyalty to the cause represented by the General. The General has absolute authority over the soldier, but is also the provider of their every need. As Christians, Christ is our General and the Kingdom of Christ is our cause.

Soldiers do not fight in combat every day. Usually, fifty to one hundred times as much effort is put into training as into the combat for which the training prepares the soldier. Soldiers seldom function as an individual. Even when they are on individual assignment, their duties are part of a bigger picture and an overall plan. Soldiers do not know the overall plan, only their individual assignment. Teamwork and cooperation are part of the training routine. The training is performed over and over until the required actions are a routine part of the soldier. When the soldier is under the stress of combat, the training takes over and the soldier’s actions are natural responses to each situation they are in. The training also builds the character traits needed for the soldier in combat: loyalty, trustworthiness, confidence, respectability, and honor. **Unity of purpose and in execution is important**. The unity of purpose is founded in their confidence and trust in the General or Commander-in-Chief. Soldiers work in a command structure with the General or Commander at the top, captains, lieutenant, sergeants, and privates. Each level of leadership carries out the orders from above and adds details for working out the mission according to the needs of the moment in accordance with the General’s master plan. Christ is portrayed as “the Captain of the Lord’s Host” (Joshua 5:13-15); this is the top of the command structure of faith. (Other church leaders, such as apostles, overseers/elders/pastors, deacons, and ministry lay leaders answer God’s call and work within the congregational “command structure”, but Christ is always the Head of the Church,) Soldier’s **communication skills are honed so that duties can be performed effectively and efficiently**. Their combat vocabulary is intentionally terse and focused. Hand signals and secret codes are often used. All of these skills are part of the soldier’s team training. Obedience to the commands of higher leaders provide for unity in purpose. Teamwork ensures unity in execution.

Each soldier needs to have confidence in their comrades-in-arms as well as faith in their commander. The soldiers gain confidence in their comrades as they train and endure hardships together. Whether in training or in combat, the soldier is isolated from the worldly cares of daily life, like food and clothing. Their needs are provided by the General so that they can focus on their duties as a soldier. Soldiers must be diligent in their training and disciplined in their actions for success. They are thoroughly focused and to obedient the duties and orders. We can see these attitudes worked out in the Church in 2 Timothy 2:1-4 as well as how Paul refers to co-workers in the early Church as fellow soldiers in Philippians 2:25 and Philemon 1:2.

During training, soldiers encounter many realistic obstacles and difficulties. An essential part of the training is for soldiers to **encourage** each other over the obstacles so that everybody succeeds. There is both individual training and team training, and both are essential. Soldiers learn to fight their individual battles while trusting their team members to take care of their sides and back. The Roman soldiers fought in close ranks, shoulder to shoulder. Each soldier was trained to take or defend the piece of ground one arm’s length in front of him. He had to trust the soldiers to each side to do the same. Fighting this way, the Romans conquered the world. Men generally experience friendship shoulder to shoulder and naturally feel supported in this position. (Women generally experience friendship face to face.) There is a natural camaraderie among soldiers. This is an outgrowth of the **team-building and unity of purpose**.

Part of the discipline of a soldier is total devotion to duty. While much of this devotion is instilled by the discipline of the commander (the punishments are severe for dereliction of duty), the training and support of each other in combat (i.e., under extremely harsh conditions and mutual suffering) also develops an esprit de corps that also contributes to devotion to duty.

A good marriage is not combative, but there is often an attitude of “**you and me against the world**” that builds between husband and wife as they face daily difficulties in life. Both husband and wife need to practice encouragement, devotion (to marital duties), and discipline in both action and speech with each other and especially with their children. Ideally, they view each other as comrades and God as the general, but many cultural expectations tend to break this ideal down. Men are sometimes told by the culture to demonstrate fearlessness and command presence in the presence of women. While bravado (false confidence) is a trait often admired, **bossiness is always harmful to intimacy**. Husbands are well advised to view themselves as privates who are assigned by their commander to lead a squad (family) into the battle fray of life. It is good to be confident where it is right to do so, but to also be honest when there are doubts. This invites **mutual encouragement** and helps to solidify bonds of intimacy.

When a wife encourages the attitude of “you and me against the world” in facing the daily difficulties of life, the husband experiences support and camaraderie. The husband needs to acknowledge this support and feeling of friendship in his own heart. When he does so, he will be more responsive to meeting his wife’s needs for companionship.

Soldiers are also known for “playing hard” in their non-combat, non-training time. Since their lives are at risk, commanders encourage soldiers to enjoy life together. Obviously, it is not good to celebrate the debauchery for which soldiers (or sailors) can have a reputation, but marriage partners should find opportunities to celebrate life together (“downtime” or “off-duty” time). By enjoying life together whenever possible (not neglecting the tasks of family and basic survival), a couple finds “soldierly” companionship, which is particularly satisfying to wives.

Guard duty is a familiar soldier task; falling asleep while on duty is subject to severe punishment, even death. The consequences of failing to achieve devotion to duty are severe in marriage. They are often brought about by infidelity. However, it is also important for each partner to guard their hearts to keep themselves pure for each other. “How can a young man keep his way pure? **By guarding it according to your word**. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!” (Psalm 119:9-10 [RST 118]). Both partners must avoid pornography and adulterous fantasizing as well as actual adulterous affairs. This tends to be a special problem for men, but it can be for women as well. It also has consequences when raising children as well. The parents must provide an excellent relationship model for their children; otherwise, their children will become handicapped in their formation of healthy relationships. Children can also feel betrayed when their parents get divorced, even after the children leave “the nest” to live an independent adult life.

Marriage demands a continuation of the tenderness and grace that was present during the courtship. Part of the marriage is for both partners to continually rekindle romance. This is challenging during the struggles of everyday living and demands discipline to implement. During courtship, they said tender things to each other; this needs to continue into and throughout their marriage. So they need to also guard their tongues. See Psalm 141:3-4 [RST 140], “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with men who work iniquity, and let me not eat of their delicacies!” One can easily see that it is challenging to bridle the tongue, especially in the heat of anger. As husband and wife succeed in submitting to God, His Spirit does help them imbue their speech with grace and to give grace to each other when the words are hurtful. See also Philippians 4:7, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The General trains His troops, so the marriage team also needs to be trained by God.

Marriage does not have a training routine…each day is its own struggle. (God, as their loving Commander, is setting out the training program before them in many unseen ways.) As a result, husband and wife need to develop personal habits to maintain and build intimacy, especially emotional and spiritual intimacy. It is also a good idea for them to have a routine that gives them time together so that they can be intentionally romantic. This is time away from distractions (including children) so that they can keep their relationship as a priority above the demands of daily life.

In our relationship with God, we need to set aside time to focus on prayer and meditation on His Word. We need to develop the discipline of purity of heart and mind as well. We also need to have the discipline to be thankful to Him in everything. Similarly, we need to set aside time for each other.

The “soldier” level of relationship is critical, because it is the first level that truly starts putting the interests of your companion above your own. Both partners cooperate to help each other in meeting each other’s needs: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Lower levels of relationship consider your companion’s interests largely because it is in your own self-interest to do so, and may be confined to just physical needs. Graduation to a “soldier” relationship is a major step forward in marital intimacy.

### Branch – Mutual Dependence, Commitment, & Fruitfulness

The branch (each of us) is to abide in the vine (Christ) where we receive everything we need, including pruning from the Father, in order to bear much fruit (thereby giving glory to God). The vine provides nourishment, strength, and stability, but does not bear fruit in itself. However, the quality of the fruit cannot exceed the quality of the vine. (Of course, we cannot exceed the perfection of Jesus, but we are supposed to be His image to others.) The branches have little strength in themselves, but bear much fruit, revealing the detailed nature of the vine. The pruning allows light to reach the leaves of the branch and ensures that the strength of the branch goes into producing fruit instead of foliage; it also ensures that disease and rot from dead branches do not affect the healthy ones. It is a very tight relationship. The concept of abiding in the vine is critically important. All life in the branches comes from the vine. The purpose of each branch is to be very fruitful (See John 15). Bearing fruit brings glory to God, proves that we are disciples of Christ, demonstrates the love of Christ toward others, and provides satisfaction and joy for each of us in this type of relationship with Christ.

The concept of abiding in the Vine often confuses people. “Abide” is a translation of a Greek term which means, “to stay in a given place, state, relation, or expectancy.” The passage calls us to live in a tight relationship with the Vine (Christ). We must remain in this state and not be distracted by the callings of the sinful world, which is opposed to Christ. We live expecting that all of our needs are met in Jesus Christ. Our purpose for abiding in Christ is to bear much (spiritual) fruit. From Galatians 5, we find that we do this by walking in the Spirit; that is, we are obedient to His will. In John 15, Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another.” When we walk in the Spirit, we bear the fruit of the Spirit, which is the very character of Christ. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Abiding means total dependence upon Him, commitment to doing His will, and fulfilling His purposes for your life.

We branches remain tightly connected with Christ through knowing Him through the Word and through prayer (i.e., communications). The nourishment of the Vine is the love of Christ, demonstrated in His sacrifice for our sins on the Cross. His sustaining life comes from His resurrection victory over sin and death. The branch stays connected to the vine by the power of the vine, not the branch. A storm may take away a few leaves, but the vine retains the branch.

In marriage, this level of relationship occurs when both partners (not just one) are **mutually committed** to each other. In the mutual commitment, they also realize their dependence upon each other and grow in appreciation for the different things they contribute to the relationship. That dependence upon each other cannot exist without mutual trust. Often, but not always, the individual contributions are related to raising their children. However, there are many other little things one may do for the other that are highly appreciated. Perhaps a special skill or talent that contributes to their mutual joy in life. Perhaps it is a sense of humor that is brought forth in times of trouble. Perhaps it is the expression of an artistic or musical talent. The desire to do this is living with intentional fulfillment of the wedding vows. (In fact, this is one of meanings of “to abide”, living in fulfillment of a vow, promise or agreement.)

Fruitfulness in relationship is manifested in serving each other for the accomplishment of their mutual purposes consistently and intentionally. It is also helping each other discover and achieve their individual and mutual purposes in Christ. This is where “loving, nourishing, and cherishing” from Ephesians 5 comes in so that God-given talents, spiritual gifs, abilities, and passions are developed and used. It is a service to each other that goes beyond the service of the lower levels of intimacy that have been described above. While “abiding” intimacy may result in children, there are many ways to service each other. Every goal they adopt for their lives is an opportunity to serve each other (as well as others). There is a likelihood that the goals they achieve will result in some personal satisfaction or glory for just one spouse, but they both revel in the recognition. This mutual celebration is easily recognized by others. For instance, one may work while the other goes to school to get an advanced degree. When they achieve their degree, the graduation is a celebration for both. “I never could have done it without you, my beloved.” The key in this level of intimacy is the realization that there is full reciprocation in the relationship. Each one is serving the other in a way that advances goals they both desire for each other.

At this level, **love is actively recognized by both partners and forgiveness is plentiful. Joy is also plentiful. They truly seek unity of purpose. They are faithful to each other**.

### Congregation – Mutual Rule/Law/Family of God

In Biblical terms, the relationship of congregation is formed when people from diverse families realize that they belong to each other in Christ. Often, they refer to belonging to the family of God (or being the people of God’s possession), so that the love expressed between them is at least equivalent to the love naturally occurring between brothers and sisters.

One of the key elements in this relationship is sharing common personal values (personal priorities and ethics) and views of the world. Throughout the Bible, this is directed by God and the people have adopted His values (i.e., The Law) as their own. Interestingly, we have seen how God has even modified His Law in order to accommodate the hardness of the human heart (by allowing divorce under some limited conditions, whereas God hates divorce). Since God has already compromised as much as He is willing to do, we must accept His will and the Law as it is and live with it. In so doing, the law is our tutor, allowing us to be conformed to the image of Christ and putting on the mind of Christ, which is how we are really moved into intimacy with God.

In Congregation, there is mutual edification (building up, encouragement, sympathizing in trials, and reminding each other of our position in Christ). Psalm 100 [RST 99] provides a beautiful picture of this. There is mutual expression of unbridled joy (verse 1) equivalent to the shouts of joy when the home team wins a championship game on the last play of the game. There is mutual encouragement to service (verse 2), and reminders in the midst of the service that it is work unto the Lord Jesus (important when the people being served are not appreciative of the help they are receiving). The congregation comes together for the mutual purpose of giving thanks, songs of praise, and acknowledgment of His Lordship over us (verses 2-4); this is for the effect of bringing about obedience to His will, which is ultimate worship. Finally, there is mutual acknowledgment and instruction in the attributes of our God, so we can get to know Him better: His love, His goodness, His mercies, His faithfulness, etc. (verse 5).

Similarly, in marriage, the each partner has come from a different family background with somewhat different values and even from different cultures, and a number of ideas, values, philosophies, etc. have had to be reconciled between them in order for their marriage to move forward. Surely there are many, many issues that a couple must reconcile. Certainly they must develop a common philosophy about the discipline of children or else their family will be an undisciplined disaster. Without the attitudes of Congregation in the marriage, there is a tendency toward increasing conflict. At this point, one spouse must submit to the other or else the conflict will escalate. God has provided the concept of headship of the husband and submission of the wife to her own husband to resolve these kinds of conflicts, at least initially. However, as the marriage matures and intimacy grows, the wise husband will recognize certain dictates of his wife are good to follow and she recognizes how important it is for them to not allow conflicts to fester and disrupt the harmony of their intimacy.

Within any conflict, there are the facts in dispute, the perception of the facts in dispute, and the feelings of each individual. Differences at any level can serve to perpetuate the conflict and make it progressively more intense. At low levels of intimacy (sheep or servant), the facts in conflict may be dominant. For instance, the husband’s family traditions are different from the wife’s family’s traditions and the spouses each perceive their family of origin to be “correct” for their circumstances; feelings of anger may dominate the conflict because rejections of my family traditions are interpreted as a rejection of me or because “you” are rejecting “my” ideas. At higher levels of intimacy (subject or soldier), the facts may be resolved but their individual perceptions still differ and angry feelings may result because “you” are rejecting “my” ideas and not respecting my feelings. At still higher levels of intimacy (branch and congregation), the individual perceptions are resolved, and only the issues driven by feelings are difficult to resolve. At the level of congregation, sufficient intimacy exists for the couple to respect each other’s feelings and for them to work toward a wise resolution while acknowledging the reality of their differing feelings and examining why those differences exist.

In congregational marriage, the couple values the joy they have in each other above the pettiness of differences they may have. They desire to serve each other fully out of love, not merely duty. They seek each other’s company above other activities. They appreciate each other’s strengths and weaknesses and seek to encourage each other when they are having difficulties in life. They seek to praise each other in their accomplishments. When they have children, the children are integrated into these mutual activities. This has the benefit of training the children toward marriage intimacy when they come of age by the fine example of their parents.

The congregational marriage is not constrained to just husband and wife; any and all children are also included. Just as a congregational relationship with God celebrates the family of God, the congregational marital intimacy spills over upon the children, even adopted or foster children. The children are well integrated in to the goals, values, and systems the family is pursuing. They are expected to contribute according to their abilities, and they are included in reaping the rewards as well.

To arrive at this level of intimacy, trust, truthfulness, faithfulness, and communications have been solidified in the relationship and integrated into the fabric of the family. There has been a lot of expression of love and grace between them. They have achieved a high level of unity in their goals, opinions, and personal philosophies. Both have found that their mutual view of the world is stronger than their past individual beliefs. **They enjoy each other’s company**.

### Friend – Sacrifice, Obedience, & Freedom of Information

In John 15:13-15 Jesus tells His disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” As His disciples, they are under a master-slave relationship, but as friends they experience a new level of relationship. Jesus identifies several aspects of this relationship:

* Willingness to sacrifice, even unto death (but this is also present at some level in the soldier relationship)
* Obedience (but this is present even in a slave relationship)
  + Love for each other (but this is present in each level of relationship above soldier and is often manifested in slave-level relationships)
* Disclosure of truth (but this is fundamental to each level of relationship)

We see that all of the aspects of friendship identified by Jesus are present in lower levels of relationship, so what has changed?

As soldiers, there is a willingness to sacrifice even their lives for their comrades. However, there is recognition that their lives belong to the General and that the sacrifice is for the greater good of accomplishing the mission. This can be done without actually caring for the persons that may be saved by the sacrifice; it is done through a sense of duty. In friendship, there so much love for each other that the sacrifice is focused on what is good for the person who is loved. Christ’s motivation was suffer the agony and death of the cross in order for us to be rescued from the wrath of God focused against our sins.

If the couple has developed the attitude of “you and me against the world” (a soldier attitude), they may also adopt an attitude of “you and I can change the world.” In so doing, they are developing mutual goals in serving others. Sharing mutual activities in the community, house of faith, workplace, etc. is an outgrowth of mutual friendship and contributes to further intimacy.

Obedience is present in many levels of intimacy, but obedience is morphed from selfish motives of avoiding chastisement or conflict and obtaining reward or recognition into motives inspired by love of the person making requests. Even the nature of the commandment is modified from one of “do – or else” through one of “do this because it is good for you” to one of “do this because you love me”. Associated with each of these transitions is a growth in mutual trust in the relationship.

In every relationship, there is a certain degree of mystery and non-disclosure. Jesus assures His friends that He has fully disclosed everything made known to Him by God the Father. This does not mean that He has disclosed every detail that would impart full understanding and even omniscience to us. It does mean that all of the principles of God’s will have been disclosed. It does not mean that Jesus is providing all of the motives of God’s purposes or the timing of every future event. One of the limiting factors in His disclosure of information is our ability to receive it and use it in the right spirit (The Spirit). There is still plenty of room for trusting in God by faith. The principles, provided through Christ and the Bible, are sufficient for spiritual growth and for daily wisdom.

The growth in marriage intimacy needs to go through these same transitions. The growth occurs through mutual truthful disclosure, demonstrations of love (even under the most adverse conditions), and the growth of mutual trust and faithfulness demonstrated by continual love and respect and clear choices and acts of trustworthiness. The growth of trust is somewhat dependent on their willingness to share their deepest thoughts and to not withhold anything from each other.

One of the interesting dynamics of marriage is the difference between men and women. Both have things that they enjoy sharing with friends of the same sex but would withhold from open expression in mixed company. A man might express appreciation of a woman’s beauty. This is fine, but if he shares this thought with his wife, he should also reassure her that he is not diminishing his higher opinion of her. He doesn’t desire that she compete with the other woman. A wife might ask her husband, “What are you thinking?” Perhaps his gaze is unfamiliar to her or he seems to be somewhere other than in her presence. It seems impossible for her to believe that he might actually be thinking about “nothing”. However, men do have the ability to subjugate their thoughts so that they are not aware of what they are thinking. Women, for the most part, are thinking about multiple things at the same time and their minds are always overflowing with thoughts; they are aware of their thoughts even in their sleep. Husbands and wives need to invest a lot of time and effort in understanding each other…how they think, not merely what they think; how they love and receive love; how they experience emotions; how they express and receive forgiveness; how they face stressful circumstances; how they enjoy life; and how they are most stimulated through their relationship. Of course, this discovery process begins even during their courtship, but it is mature as friends.

Men and women do indeed experience friendship differently. Men experience friendship shoulder to shoulder, perhaps working on a task together or sitting together watching the same sport, movie, etc. Women mostly experience friendship face to face. Women tend to read body language and pay careful attention to eyes and expressions to discover emotional cues. In friendship intimacy, the couple conducts their activities so that both have equal realization of friendship. When they have children, there are many tasks to be accomplished, resulting in a “shoulder to shoulder” relationship, so they also set aside time to merely enjoy each other’s company face to face. It may be in the simplicity of sitting across from each other and conversing over dinner, or it may be part of a “date night” routine.

Spouses need to guard their thoughts and their hearts to ensure that their marriage partner is indeed their best friend. They need to **regard their spouse as their best friend and more worthy to share inner thoughts with than with any other friend**. They need to avoid exposure to thoughts and things (such as pornography) and activities that tempt them to think less of their partner. At lower levels of intimacy, the disclosure of deep inner thoughts might induce insecurities or mistrust, but as friends, the trust is so great that no thought is considered without grace. Generally, the spouse who is disclosing the thought thinks ahead and is careful to express the thought with grace, but even when it jumps off the tongue, the listening spouse only reacts in loving acceptance. They love each other so much that they want to share everything.

### Bride of Christ – Prepared for Unending Intimacy

There are a variety of images of the Messiah (Christ) as the bridegroom and His chosen people being the bride. In Isaiah 62:4-5, Ezekiel 16:7-14, and Hosea 2:19, the Lord is portrayed as the husband of His people. The kingdom of heaven is described through the parable of the 10 virgins in Matthew 15:1-13. The parable depicts virgins awaiting the long delayed arrival of the Bridegroom to take them to His home; 5 are prepared but 5 are not prepared and miss His arrival. The oil of their lamps is the Spirit of Christ. This image of this aspect of relationship with God is culminated in Revelation 21 as unending fulfillment and satisfaction with the tears of this present age being wiped away. In this life, it is an intimacy with God that is motivated to draw ever closer in order to better experience the anticipated eternal relationship.

In spiritual practice, we do everything we can to remove obstacles to experiencing intimacy with God. There is no direct correlation with our earthly marriages except the attitude of desiring and pursuing ever closer intimacy. **For the husband, it is an attitude of continuing to pursue his wife as if he were still courting her**. **For the wife, it is the desire to perfect herself in pleasing her husband and helping him to be more perfect**. This level of intimacy with God is close to the following level of being a child of God and co-inheritor with Christ.

This theme of relationship is more fully developed in Appendix D.

### Co-inheritor – Maximum Intimacy & Spiritual Unity

In Romans 8, we see a number of very remarkable principles of our relationship with God. Within this single chapter, we see the following attributes of the relationship which are prepared for us in Christ by His work here on earth:

* No condemnation (verse 1)
* Freedom from the obligations of the Law (verses 2-4)
* Transforming of our minds (verses 5-9)
* Eternal unity with the Spirit of God (verses 10-17)
  + Transformed motivations and behavior
  + Sons of God
  + Co-inheritors with Christ
* Hope for eternity (and ability to endure the present) (verses 18-27)
* Spiritual victory including **no separation** from God the Father (verses 26-39)

Each of these principles is critically important in order to realize intimacy with God and show how God has taken away the barriers for us to experience maximal intimacy with Him.

Since God has done everything possible on His part for us to have intimacy with Him, what must we do to experience that intimacy? Clearly, we need to reciprocate in each step of intimacy to enter into the higher levels, knowing that it is fully possible to enjoy this maximal intimacy and spiritual unity while we are yet in this current fleshly existence. On the other hand, we also know that an even greater intimacy awaits us when we receive our glorified bodies and can see God face-to-face. We are prevented from this now because of our sinful flesh and His perfect holiness. But God has also made provision for our preparation and perfection for eternity.

Let us examine the implications for human marriage and the desired maximum intimacy God desires for us to achieve. An important thing for us to remember in this examination is that the growth of intimacy may be asymmetric. One partner may be able to adopt more mature attitudes needed for greater intimacy well ahead of the other. In itself, this can pose problems. The more mature partner must be both patient and understanding that there may be factors and issues in their spouse’s life that prevent them from maturing as rapidly in their marriage intimacy.

As imperfect individuals, we can often behave badly, even toward each other in marriage. We need to recognize that we are not being condemned by the other’s bad behavior. Neither should we condemn the other when they behave badly. This does not mean that there cannot be constructive criticism and graceful correction. Bad behavior does require correction and should lead to repentance. There must be room for forgiveness, and love and grace must always dominate the relationship.

It is especially difficult when the bad behavior is a breach of marital trust. The most difficult circumstance is an extra-marital affair. However, lying, fiscal irresponsibility, abuse, and many other sins also undermine intimacy. The most painful aspect for a less mature spouse is to realize that even the worst behavior in their spouse is forgivable. However, the forgiveness needs to take place in their heart before it is extended to their spouse. Their spouse needs to be repentant of their bad behavior, and this extends beyond mere expressions of sorrow. There needs to be a fruit of repentance that is demonstrably real and not merely a shallow attempt to re-earn their spouse’s favor in order to start getting the benefits of their relationship the bad-actor has taken for granted. When there is an eventual re-establishment of relationship, the make-up process needs to be especially rich to discourage future bad behavior of the same type. Throughout the process of extending love and forgiveness, there needs to be discipline on the part of the offended one to demonstrate that the act is what is being condemned, but the spouse is still loved. This is difficult to do, and sometimes wise counsel from trusted outsiders is needed.

Freedom from obligations of the Law does not mean that all behaviors are acceptable. To the contrary, it means that each person wants to adhere to a much higher standard than that required by the Law because of love. The Bible presents the Law as an expression of God’s will. Jesus demonstrates that many provisions of the Law were needed because of the sinful pursuit of exceedingly harmful desires by people enslaved to sin. When we come to Christ, we are no longer enslaved to sin but we are enslaved to the righteousness of Christ, but we only obey that righteousness when we are walking in the Spirit of Christ. The Law is still in effect, but it remains as a tutor to remind us of the minimal expression of the will of God. When we walk in the Spirit, we automatically fulfill the will of God in detail, so the Law is also fulfilled and we are free.

In marriage, we are under the contract of our marriage vows. This is the minimal expression of the law of our marriage. Usually, people have the full intention of fulfilling their vows because they love each other. They cannot imagine circumstances that would distract them from being true to their vows. Then, life happens. At the same time that they may be angry with each other because of some long-term (unresolved) conflict, they may meet each some other person who seems to fulfill the needs that they don’t presently have in the marriage. The immature person forgets the vows and selfishly seeks to have his (her) needs met outside the marriage. This is always bad behavior.

Another circumstance can arise when one spouse has permission from the other to do things that violate God’s design for marriage. While the resulting sins may not make the spouse resentful (at least not directly), both partners become susceptible to other sinful behaviors that do violate each other because they have neglected maintaining healthy attitudes toward building intimacy rather than violating it. Another issue may arise from indirect consequences of the permitted behavior that creates a harmful condition later. (For instance, Sarah gave her hand-maiden, Hagar, to her husband, Abraham, thinking that perhaps she would have a son through Hagar. When Hagar became pregnant, she despised Sarah. Sarah ended up mistreating her, and Hagar ran away. God appeared to Hagar and instructed her to return and to submit to Sarah, which she did. Later, her son, Ishmael derided Sarah’s natural son, Isaac. Again, there was a dispute between Hagar and Sarah. Hagar and Ishmael had to leave the family as a result. See Genesis chapters 16 and 21.) A very common “modern” idea is that husband and wife both have the same basic needs for love and should be so equal in marriage that the wife should not submit to her husband. This is wrong (because it denies the headship of the husband), violating God’s design, and leads to conflicts that could have been easily resolved but are not. This undermines intimacy and discourages growth of the relationship. If the wife recognizes that she needs to show respect for her husband and to submit to his authority, then many conflicts will be resolved favorably for both. If the husband loves his wife and nourishes and cherishes her in accordance with God’s design, he will also give her opportunity for input to the decisions that need to be made in such a way that it is not burdensome for her to submit to him.

Throughout the growth of intimacy, there must be a change in both husband and wife in the way they think about each other as well as how they behave toward each other. Love and respect for each other must increase, love of self must decrease. If these things happen, then conflicts become less frequent and less intense when they do occur. Peace and satisfaction increase. Husband and wife must also grow together in their mutual view of the world, adopting a common philosophy. In primitive cultures, this is much easier to accomplish than in the highly complex modern cultures. Modernism emphasizes individuality and philosophically undermines the development of marital intimacy. On the other hand, as husbands and wives freely communicate their opinions about the variety of issues and convince each other about their views (avoiding condemnation and showing respect in the process), they freely tend to adhere to their developed mutual beliefs rather than whatever their differing personal philosophies were and their intimacy grows. However, everybody must recognize that deeply held beliefs directly impact behaviors. There is always a danger when one person adopts a set of beliefs intellectually but has not fully accepted them in their heart. In this case, they will act hypocritically and can be very offensive even to their spouse in the process. This is especially true in religious matters. Both husband and wife must guard themselves, and their marriage, against shifting opinions in their culture.

Co-inheritance is truly a case where husband and wife have arrived in unity of spirit. Within the attitudes of co-inheritance is an attitude of “ours” rather than yours and mine. They have developed mutual purposes, plans, and hopes as well as common personal philosophies. When they have a family, they share mutual aspirations for each of their children. (However, they should be careful not to inhibit the child’s development of their interests and aspirations that may be different from their parent’s. As long as the child desires good things, they should be encouraged.) When a couple is living in a state of co-inheritance, they provide excellent models of relationship to their children. It is natural for children to emulate their parents, and their marriage relationship is one of the best examples that they can provide to their children.

Of course, life is filled with adversity. Couples living in **unity** with each other face life’s trials with significantly greater peace and contentment than couples at lower levels of intimacy. This is because a couple in unity has assurance of victory in spite of adversity. They know how to rejoice together, comfort each other, cry with each other, and care for each other’s wounds. Their thoughts may be so completely unified that conversations are conducted out of joy rather than necessity. Living in unity, they become highly dependent upon each other and thoroughly identify with each other rather than with their individuality. Rather than “losing themselves” in each other, as some popular sub-cultures are fearful of doing, they find an even higher calling and purpose in life than anything they had experienced as an individual. Rather than idealizing life to deny adversity, they have conquered adversity together. In the midst of the evils of life, they have found greater good. They have achieved a synergism in their marital relationship. This is indeed a greater victory than they could have imagined on their wedding night.

## Some Summary Notes on God’s Example

God’s behavior toward us is always perfect. We are not perfect, merely in the process of being perfected. We need to learn to show grace to each other even as God shows grace to us. Since marriage and intimacy with God are closely joined in principle, the principles which grow our spiritual relationship with God also contribute to growing in marital intimacy, and vice versa. This is not accidental; it is part of God’s intent for mankind from the beginning.

God’s example is a good model for us to learn how to grow closer to each other. His models for growing spiritually are useful for showing us how to grow in intimacy. His models for dealing with our sins are also good models for our learning how to deal with our sins against each other. However, we must also be careful of two things:

1. Each level of intimacy is founded on the lower levels and
2. It is possible to regress if one forgets the essential attitudes associated with each level.

Each level of intimacy is based upon perfecting key attitudes associated with the level. These attitudes are dependent upon the more basic attitudes found in the lower levels. You cannot jump into a relationship at a high level of intimacy, although you may rapidly progress through the levels. If you forget a key attitude, you will fall back to the level where the attitude is grown and perfected. If each spouse behaves consistently with their maturity, they will be contributing to the growth of their relationship. A more mature spouse can promote growth in a less mature spouse by simply fulfilling their mature behavioral commitments to their spouse as intended by God.

Because marriage is a mutual relationship, the level of intimacy experienced in the marriage is the lowest common denominator of that of either spouse. An individual’s behavior may be more mature than their spouse’s, but the marriage is limited to their mutual attainment. In addition, the higher levels of intimacy are absolutely achieved as a couple, not as individuals.

These principles are important for us to remember:

1. Love covers a multitude of sins.
2. Every level of intimacy depends upon the foundations laid by lower levels of intimacy.
3. Intimacy is fragile and precious. We need to guard against anything that would damage what we have already obtained.
4. We need to value our marriage relationship above all other relationships. This is God’s design. We need to have no closer friend than our spouse, save for God Himself.
5. When troubles arise, turn to each other before turning to others, except for God.
6. Invest in each other, giving your time and attention to each other no matter what distractions are trying to dissuade you. Make it your best time.
7. Speak truthfully to each other at all times with love, respect, and grace.
8. Always seek to encourage and build up each other in truth, love, and good works. Remember to cherish and appreciate the good things each of you does for each other. Admonish each other gently with the good purpose of helping each to grow and for you to grow together.
9. Remember your vows to each other. Keep them as sacred (they are sacred before God).
10. Guard your heart against all temptations that would in any way cause you to act in a manner that is unfaithful, untrustworthy, or disrespectful toward your partner.
11. Seek to act in a way worthy of the respect of your spouse.
12. Seek God – together.
13. Set mutual goals and hopes.
14. Seek to act wisely together.

Remember to seek to make your spouse your best friend, because this is God’s intent for your marriage as well as in your mutual best interest.

Traits of a Christian Black Belt (1 Timothy 3)

1 It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. 2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. *4 He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity 5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), *6 and* not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. 7 And he must have a good reputation with those outside *the church,* so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

8 Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, *9 but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 11 Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households. 13 For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

15…so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

1st Paul – Discipleship of one person

2nd Paul – Leadership of a small group (discipleship of 3-12)

3rd Paul – Leadership & discipleship of large groups under supervision

4th Paul – Deacon – service to a congregation

5th Paul – Overseer, elder, pastor (associate or assistant pastor in a large congregation, overseer of an independent ministry, or senior pastor of a smaller congregation) (1st Master Level)

6th Paul – Senior pastor, single large congregation (over 100 souls)

7th Paul – Multi-congregational overseer

8th Paul – Overseer of a church association

9th Paul – Apostle / church planter

10th Paul – Christ, the Grandmaster (perfection)