**Marriage Core Seminar**

Class#5: Grace in Marriage

**I. Introduction**

Marriage is unfair. That truth is blindingly obvious and simultaneously, surprisingly offensive. Marriage is not fair. In fact, a demand for marriage to be fair is the slow death of a marriage. I talked about this last week in light of 1 Peter 3: a wife will feel marriage is unfair because she is in a more vulnerable place than her husband, which requires sacrifice. And a husband will feel marriage is unfair because he must pursue his wife to make that vulnerability feel safe, which also requires sacrifice.

So with unfairness in view it’s to the topic of grace that we turn our attention this morning. Grace is a great challenge in marriage precisely because it is inherently unfair. If grace is the dominant feel to a marriage, you will so often take a step back and say, “but that’s so *unfair!*” Precisely. Because it’s grace. And grace the glory of marriage.

I mentioned last week about how the path to sweetness in marriage is to make vulnerability safe. Well, grace is a significant part of how that happens. If there was no sin or weakness in marriage, there would be very little vulnerability in marriage. But there *is* sin and weakness, and your response to it will largely dictate your experience of marriage, for better or for worse. If your response is characterized by self-righteousness or scolding or scorn, your marriage will be brittle. But if your response is characterized by grace, you’ll make vulnerability safe and your marriage will be sweet and satisfying. And by being sweet and satisfying, a grace-saturated marriage shows off the beauty of *God’s* grace. Remember, as we’ve been saying since class number one, the purpose of marriage is not found primarily in what it produces—companionship, kids, ministry, joy—but in what it *portrays* about God to each other and those around us. Is there any more important way that marriage can portray God than when it portrays God’s grace, and shows *it* to be sweet and satisfying?

This morning, we’ll begin by considering what grace is. Then we’ll look at one of its poisonous opposites—self-righteousness. And finally we’ll look at what is perhaps the preeminent act of grace in a marriage, forgiveness. So then, grace, self-righteousness, and forgiveness. It’s worth saying that while our focus today is on marriage, there’s almost nothing I’ll say that won’t apply to other relationships as well. So our material today is highly applicable whether you’re married or not.

**II. Grace**

J. I. Packer, a great 20th century theologian, said that, “No need in Christendom is more urgent than the need for a renewed awareness of what the grace of God really is.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A. So what is grace? One of the places in Scripture where we see it most clearly laid out is in Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6 about loving our enemies. Luke 6:27, “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:27-31).

Jesus isn’t telling us to love one category of people—our enemies—without any implications for the rest of life (including our marriages). Instead, he’s defining a whole ethic of love by highlighting its extreme: love even your enemies. If we can love *them* like this, then *certainly* this should be our love in marriage. So what is this love? Love that gives the opposite of what people deserve. That is, love that’s not merely *un*conditional but *contra-*conditional. And that’s grace, isn’t it? Grace is favor that’s granted regardless of what’s deserved, and quite often *despite* what’s deserved.

Now, when Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, he isn’t telling us to ignore abuse. In fact, when Paul revisits Jesus’ teaching at the end of Romans 12, he seems so concerned about this potential misunderstanding that he then gives us an entire *chapter* as parenthetical explanation to discuss the legitimate role of the state to punish wrongdoers—that’s Romans 13—before he returns to his theme of giving up our rights for others in Romans 14. So no, Jesus’s teaching doesn’t condemn legitimate self-defense. But he *does* call us to lay down our rights, to live out grace.

B. What does grace look like in marriage? Let me give you a few ideas.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Kindness. As Jesus says in verse 31, “as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” The Golden Rule. You take out the trash even though your husband forgot to (yet again) without taking advantage of that deliciously self-righteous opportunity to tell him what you did. That’s grace. Grace can be large and extravagant—the fabulous birthday gift that she never dreamed you could pull off. But very often the actions that *saturate* a marriage with grace are small, though frequent.
2. Mercy. That is, responding with kindness when you’ve been wronged. “Often the golden rule is understood as a way to keep from making enemies. But Jesus gives the golden rule specifically for situations where enemies have already come into the picture.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Golden Rule is intended specifically for when we’ve been wronged. Respond to sin with mercy. Personally, I find that quite challenging. But if Jesus tells us to love our *enemies* this way, how much more so a husband or a wife?
3. Forbearance. One thing you’ll find in marriage is that your spouse will sin against you in the same way repeatedly. And not all of those will be good opportunities to point out what they’ve done—at least, not if your goal is to love your spouse rather than to condemn them. In fact, for the little sins that happen frequently in marriage, in very *few* cases will the loving thing be to point out the sin. Often, grace in marriage means overlooking an offense. As Proverbs 19:11 says, “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

Forbearance does not mean stuffing your anger inside until it explodes. No, forbearance means covering over your spouse’s sin, wiping the slate clean. Sometimes their sin is too big or too dangerous to them for you to do that. Sometimes you’re not godly enough to do that as much as you wish you were. Fair enough. Yet very often, we *can* overlook an offense and we *should* overlook an offense. Forbearance is especially appropriate when your spouse isn’t likely going to learn anything from you pointing out their sin. For example, if she said something sharp and pouty when she was tired and stressed, your pointing that out isn’t likely to reveal anything to her about her heart other than “when I’m tired and stressed I’m tempted to speak in ways I shouldn’t”—which she probably already knew. That doesn’t mean that her speech wasn’t sinful. Quite the contrary, Jesus says in Matthew 12:36 that we will give account to God for every careless word that we speak. But as tempting as it is to even the score by pointing out that sin, grace would implore you to overlook the offense.

C. Now, nothing I’ve said is revolutionary or even particularly Christian. We’re often told to “practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty”[[4]](#footnote-4) Nothing distinctly Biblical about that. But what’s distinctly *Christian* about grace is why and how we can exercise it. That’s where Jesus goes in verse 35 of Luke 6. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return [that’s grace. How? Why?], and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” As Christians, three truths empower grace in marriage:

1. Your reward will be great. Jesus doesn’t say “because in the end, what goes around comes around” or “karma happens, so live accordingly.” No: his motivation for *you* to show grace has nothing to do with the grace you might receive in return. We pursue grace for *God’s* acclaim and no one else’s. He sees. He knows. He will reward. And that’s all that matters.
2. You will be sons of the Most High. Just as a son reflects his father, your grace reflects God’s grace. Remember, a marriage portrays God’s love to those in it, and grace is a key piece of doing that. Incidentally, this means that *your* ability to show grace will be weakened if you do not view *God* as gracious. Perhaps that judgmental streak you exhibit in your marriage is because you view *God* as one who can be won over by your good works. Very often, the solution to your horizontal problems is to correct misguided thinking about God.
3. For he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. (Which, by the way, was you.) As 1 John says, “We love because he first loved us” (4:19). To whatever extent you’re able to grasp the love Christ has for you, you cannot *help* but be gracious. That’s why it’s so critical to a marriage, as Mark said two weeks ago, for you to remain in the Word. When you wander from truth about God, you wander from what powers your love.

Note that none of these three motivations for grace rely in the slightest on how deserving the recipients of grace are, or the chances that you’ll be repaid for showing grace. It’s so easy to be kind simply because that’s what makes for a good marriage. And in general it *does* make for a good marriage. But if that’s your only motivation, what do you do in the many moments in marriage when you’re quite convinced that you’re putting out a lot more kindness than your spouse? Or, tragically, when you realize you’re *not* in a good marriage? Christ’s call on us is to be gracious because he has been gracious. And in that resides incalculable power.

**Can any of you share examples of what grace has looked like in your marriage, or in a marriage you admire?**

Well, having discussed grace it’s worth a few minutes to consider its opposite in marriage:

**III. Self-Righteousness**

I should point out right away that the self-righteousness I have in mind is not your *spouse’s* self-righteousness; it’s *yours*. It’s also worth pointing out that because *you* are self-righteous, your husband or wife—or for that matter, your roommate or friend or sibling—is going to come across as a lot more self-righteous to you than they really are simply because their actions rub against your pride. Which is why you must examine your *own* self-righteousness.

Think about the words we think or speak that betray self-righteousness. “I can’t believe you would do that.” “I deserve better than this.” “Why can’t you get your act together?” Self-righteousness it is alive and well in most marriages. I appreciate pastor Dave Harvey’s definition which you’ll see in your handout: “Self-righteousness is a sense of moral superiority that appoints us as prosecutor of other people’s sinfulness [or weakness].”[[5]](#footnote-5) Self-righteousness wages war against grace.

Self-righteousness will counteract grace in your marriage. It will destroy your ability to help your spouse fight their sin. It will create suspicion where there was trust. Remember what Jesus said: take the log out of your own eye before you reach for the speck in theirs. I could say a lot about battling self-righteousness in marriage. But what I’ll highlight today is that it’s a much bigger problem than most of us give it credit for.

We see that in how Paul addresses self-righteousness in Romans 14. Paul’s warning Christians against judging and despising each other because of differences in conviction—mainly differences about what foods are forbidden. Here’s what he writes starting in verse 13:

Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

If I can summarize, “OK – you’re right. I agree with you. Eating meat isn’t a sin (that’s verse 14). But the *real* problem, verse 15, isn’t their error; it’s that you’re judging them for it.” Verse 17 again: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” I love the crescendo of that triad. Right*eousness*, not simply being right. Peace—between you and those you’re tempted to judge. And ultimately, joy. Those are the things that are far more important than whether you’re right or wrong in this particular matter.

We all know that self-righteousness is a problem in marriage. But Paul would have us treat it like a much bigger problem than we often do. When you get an inkling that you are judging or despising your spouse, that you’re being self-righteous—warning lights should be going off. Most likely, the sin of self-righteousness in your heart is of far greater urgency than whatever problem you’re seeing in your spouse—even if you’re right. So your attention should be focused on confessing and repenting of your own self-righteousness. Those who struggle most with self-righteousness are the quickest to point out errors in others; Paul’s teaching would suggest that they should be the slowest to do that.

Going back to Dave Harvey, I find the questions he asks to locate self-righteousness to be helpful.[[6]](#footnote-6)

* Am I self-confident that I see the supposed “facts” clearly?
* Am I quick to assign motives when I feel I’ve been wronged?
* Do I find it easy to build a case against someone that makes me seem right and him or her seem wrong?
* Do I ask questions with built-in assumptions that I believe will be proven right? Or do I ask impartial questions—the kind that genuinely seek new information regardless of its implications for my preferred outcome?
* Am I overly concerned about who is to blame for something?

A good set of questions to keep in your back pocket.

Before we turn to the topic of forgiveness, are there *any questions?* [if there are few questions and you have the time, you might ask which of Dave Harvey’s questions would be most useful for those in the class.]

**IV. Forgiveness**

What is forgiveness? It’s the cancelling of a debt…in full…that someone else has accrued. In marriage, that “debt” is a personal, relational debt and you’re releasing the offender from the punishment or payment that they deserve. Forgiveness is offered freely and unconditionally. It’s undeserved and cannot be earned[[7]](#footnote-7).

Let’s turn to Matthew 18 to see some of Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness, starting in Matthew 18:21. I won’t read the whole passage; it’s likely familiar to many. A man owes a huge debt to the master. He begs the master for time to pay, verse 26: “and I will pay you everything”—showing that he has no idea how unpayable and massive the debt is, just like the self-righteous person we just discussed. Verse 27, the master has pity on him and erases the entire debt. Then the man goes away and finds someone who owes him a relatively small amount of money. “Pay what you owe!” he demands—end of verse 28—and has him thrown into prison when he can’t. Jesus’ message: as unthinkable as this man’s behavior is, it is equally unthinkable that someone could be truly forgiven by God the debt of hell-deserving sin and yet themselves refuse to forgive. Forgiven sinners forgive. Not, “forgiven sinners *ought* to forgive”—though that’s true. But “forgiven sinners forgive.” That’s what they do. If you refuse to forgive it’s because you have no knowledge of having been forgiven yourself.

What I want to focus on is Jesus’ *image* for forgiveness: the erasure of a debt. Who owed the massive debt in this parable? [wait for an answer]. And who paid the debt? [wait for an answer]. Right: the master. That’s the essence of the gospel after all: Jesus paid it all! And it’s true of our relationships with each other as well. Forgiveness is the paying down of a debt. Which means that forgiveness always costs something.

Sometimes the cost is huge and intimidating. Very often though, especially in marriage, we expect forgiveness to cost nothing. Think about the phrases we use to offer this false forgiveness:

* Oh—don’t worry about it. It was nothing.
* I’ll overlook what you did, but don’t let it happen again.
* No harm no foul.

But forgiveness doesn’t say that the sin didn’t come with a cost, or that the cost was negligible. What forgiveness does is to *pay* the cost. Again, means forgiveness *always* costs something. Which makes it *always* unfair. Too often, what passes for forgiveness isn’t true forgiveness because it has not embraced the true and complete *in*justice of forgiveness. Unless forgiveness is unjust, it is not true forgiveness.

So what does unjust forgiveness look like?

*A. First, it resists the urge to punish.*

In marriage, of course, punishment doesn’t mean locking someone in jail. It means giving a cold shoulder to show just how hurt you were. It means bringing up past offenses as weapons to win an argument. It means leaving the toilet seat up *on purpose* because you’re angry. It means choosing to *not* extend kindness because—in your mind—your spouse’s sin entitles you to focus on yourself for a while.

Not punishing is especially challenging when you’re angry. Ideally, anger is a right response to injustice, and anger is sometimes what we need to have the courage to fight injustice. But we need to be suspicious of what anger tells us to do, precisely because of the inherent conflict between justice-loving anger and the injustice-dependent forgiveness. That’s where James’ words in James 1:19-20 are so useful. “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” When you’re blistering with anger, all your spouse sees is your anger. But what *you* see is injustice, and your desire for righteousness. Yet James tells you that the promises anger makes to secure righteousness are false promises. The response of punishment that anger encourages will not accomplish justice, because only God can accomplish justice. So pay attention to anger as a sign of injustice, but be wary of following its advice; it’s almost certainly promising what it cannot deliver.

So then, forgiveness resists the urge to punish. But also,

*B. Forgiveness resists the urge to pretend*.

That is, pretending that the sin didn’t happen, or that it didn’t matter. There can be a fine line between pretending that no sin was committed and forbearing or overlooking an offense, like we saw earlier in Proverbs 19:11. But nonetheless, this category of pretending is one that some of us really need to watch out for. Forgiveness is very hard and humbling work, and so instead of forgiving we pretend everything’s OK. We might do that by *saying* to ourselves that we can overlook the sin when in fact we can’t. Or by *saying* that we forgive without fully embracing the injustice of forgiveness. That is, not responding to the injustice of the sin with an equally unjust forgiveness. Underestimating the cost of forgiveness. We can often tell that we’re pretending because the hurt and anger keeps bubbling up in our hearts even though we keep telling ourselves that forgiveness isn’t necessary, or that we’ve already forgiven.

So then, forgiveness doesn’t punish and forgiveness doesn’t pretend. What does it do?

*C. Forgiveness pays the cost of the sin.*

That’s what we saw in Matthew 18. The offended one pays the cost of the offense. You leave your position facing off against the offender and walk around to their side. “I’m going to pay the cost of this offense as if it were of my own doing.” This is so contrary to a false forgiveness that says, “I won’t hold this against you, but you’d better grovel your way back into my good graces.”

Sometimes, paying that debt will assume very tangible, physical consequences. Very often in marriage though, the cost you’re paying is more relational. For example, an offense destroys trust. Trust must be rebuilt. Forgiveness doesn’t pretend like the trust hasn’t been damaged. But neither does it sit back, arms crossed, waiting for the offender to rebuild that trust. Instead, it comes alongside that person and takes on the risk of giving them opportunities to rebuild what was lost.

Or maybe an offense destroys affection and warmth. Instead of sitting back and making the offender pursue you, you pursue them, in love. You extend to them the affection that they don’t deserve.

This is especially challenging—and important—when the spouse who offended you has no idea what they really did, even after they confess. We’ll talk more about how to offer a good confession in a few weeks. But no matter how adept your spouse is at confessing their sin, they won’t always “get it.” At least not all the way, all the time. And so part of the cost that forgiveness bears is to emotionally wipe the slate clean, not keeping a record of wrong (1 Cor 13:6 “love keeps no record of wrongs”). Even though you know that they don’t understand what forgiveness really costs you. But God knows, doesn’t he? He sees. And the fact that for a Christian God will exact justice for this offense from his own son tells us that he is intimately acquainted with the cost of your forgiveness. More so even than you.

This means that forgiveness is unfair, as I mentioned earlier. Beyond that, it is *anti-*fair. It gives exactly the opposite of what justice requires. Very often, forgiveness in marriage fails to quiet the raging, angry thoughts because it's halfway forgiveness that settles for something that’s moderately *un*fair, without the courage to go all the way to *anti*-fair. Remember, true forgiveness is always costly.

Of course, I should point out that unforgiveness is even more costly. Unforgiveness sows seeds of bitterness that with time will grow in their corrosive power. *Not* forgiving someone is dangerous for your marriage—and as Jesus said in the parable, it’s even more dangerous for your soul.

So we *must* forgive, no matter the offense. And forgiveness is possible because of the Cross. That doesn’t mean that for big sins it’s always easy to understand what forgiveness will involve. If you are ever on the receiving end of a massive sin in marriage, like adultery, the best I can say to you is that if you’re a Christian you *can* forgive—but get help. There are a host of complex questions you need to work through and a pastor will be so helpful in doing that. But in every case our forgiveness is powered by Christ’s forgiveness (Eph 4:32). That’s the point of Jesus’ parable. To be married means to forgive and forbear over the long-haul. The reality is that you will keep encountering your spouse’s sin for the rest of your life together. In Matthew 18, Peter may have thought that offering to forgive seven times was something special; Jesus tells him seventy times seven. In other words, forgiveness is unlimited. To forgive someone this long and this often is not humanly possible; it takes a supernatural act from God. It takes the Holy Spirit.

Forgiveness requires that you absorb the effects of another person’s sins and release that person from punishment. This is precisely what Jesus accomplished at Calvary—He secured our forgiveness by taking on himself the full penalty of our sins (Isa 53:4-6). Forgiveness is not easy, but it is possible because of what Christ has done for us at the Cross. Forgiveness doesn’t punish, but neither does it pretend. Instead, it pays the cost because Jesus paid the cost.

**V. Conclusion**

Sin is a great obstacle to marriage—but it’s also an opportunity. If you respond to your spouse’s sin like Christ has to yours, with the grace of kindness, mercy, forbearance, and forgiveness, your marriage will be a sweet and safe picture of the God who loves us. If you respond the way your anger and self-righteousness and inner sense of fairness are demanding, marriage will be a painful and brittle picture of sin. So remember: marriage is not fair. In fact, marriage is *anti-*fair. And in that is its beauty, its glory, and the glory of the one who made it.

*Any questions?*

1. J. I. Packer, *God’s Words* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 95-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This next section largely echoes teaching in Chapter 5 of *When Sinners Say I Do* by Dave Harvey. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say I Do*, page 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Attributed to Anne Herbert who printed these words on a placemat in 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harvey, p. 91. His definition doesn’t include weakness. Though based on his introduction to his next book on marriage, *I Still Do*, it sounds like he wishes he had added that in. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Harvey, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luke 7:42-43; 2 Cor 2:7-10; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)