

**The Expulsive Power of Selflessness
to Overcome Selfishness in Marital Conflict**

Jeffrey L. Jackson

Thesis Research BC598

April 27, 2022

HOLY SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD
BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995
by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract | iv |
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| A. Purpose and Relevance | 1 |
| B. Intended Audience and Scope..... | 2 |
| C. Research Methodology | 3 |
| II. Defining the Problem | 3 |
| A. The Genesis of Selfishness | 4 |
| B. The Deceitfulness of Sin and the War Within | 5 |
| C. The Fatuity of Spiritual Immaturity | 6 |
| III. Self as a Secular Sanctum | 7 |
| A. Exalting Self as a Right..... | 7 |
| B. Defending Selfishness as a Virtue | 8 |
| C. Self Esteem as a Modern-Day Reformation | 9 |
| D. Scriptural Perspectives on the Worship of Self-Worth..... | 11 |
| IV. Looking to Our Sufficient Savior: Indicatives, Identity, and Self-Denying Responses | 12 |
| A. The Believer’s Condition in Christ..... | 12 |
| B. The Believer’s Calling in Christ | 14 |
| C. The Believer’s Conduct in Christ | 15 |
| V. Looking to the Sufficient Scripture: Imperatives, Identity, and Self-Denying Responses | 16 |
| A. Loving for Christ’s Sake..... | 17 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| B. Submitting for Christ’s Sake..... | 18 |
| C. Serving for Christ’s Sake | 19 |
| VI. Counseling for Selfless Service | 22 |
| A. Scripture, Saints, and Selfless Service (Encouraging and Affirming Together)..... | 22 |
| B. Scripture, Sufferers, and Selfless Service (Bearing and Comforting in Weakness Together)..... | 26 |
| C. Scripture, Sinners, and Selfless Service (Forgiving and Repenting Together) | 28 |
| VII. Conclusion | 29 |
| A. The Example of Jesus | 29 |
| B. The Exhortation of Jesus..... | 30 |
| C. The Expulsive Emulation of Jesus | 30 |
| Bibliography | 32 |
| Appendix 1: Wisdom Homework for Couples | 35 |
| Appendix 2: Scripture for Counseling toward Selflessness | 36 |
| Appendix 3: Three Trees Diagram..... | 37 |
| Appendix 4: Helpful Resources for Counseling toward Selflessness | 38 |

Abstract

Title: The Expulsive Power of Selflessness to Overcome Selfishness in Marital Conflict
Author: Jeffrey L. Jackson
Degree: Master of Arts in Biblical Counseling
Date: May 2022
Advisor: Dr. Stuart Scott

Marital conflict seems to be a special kind of struggle against sin and self. The person we are closest to and in whom we place our greatest trust is falling short, being selfish, disappointing us, and perhaps hurting us in the process—at least, that’s the way we see it in the heat of the moment. In these potentially supercharged scenarios, regardless of who is at fault, self can take center stage so that we sin against our spouse. Sometimes our self-centeredness reflects our sinful response to being sinned against by our spouse, and at other times the blame and the sin are convoluted with no manner of resolution evident to us. The ensuing drama can bring hard hurt to our hearts and even harder consequences that could last a lifetime. The stakes are high, and worst-case in all of this is not the harm it does to the couple, the kids, the church, or to others—it’s the grief-soaked and glory-squelched reality it is to God’s heart. Everyone loses!

God has a diagnosis in Scripture for these sin-soaked scenarios, He tells us it’s all rooted in selfishness, in ruling desires to put ourselves above others. God also provides a solution—selflessness, an overruling desire to honor God and to love our spouse which pushes out self-centeredness and puts the interests of others above our own, keeping the focus of our marriage on pleasing God in all respects. But here’s the rub: selfishness is as deceitful as it is destructive; when it rules in times of marital conflict it makes perfect sense that selfless responses would be counterproductive to our agenda. In other words, selflessness is counterintuitive to husbands and wives locked in the prison of their own self-serving agenda. What can be done?

This project aims at stressing the value of nurturing and applying a servant’s heart as an expulsive power against a self-centered heart in marital conflict. It is a way of maintaining Jesus’s own emphasis on serving and not being served in submission to God’s redemptive purposes (Mark 10:45). I have experienced the negative impact of my selfishness, and I have seen similar negative consequences in my fellow Christians and counselees. I have also experienced and witnessed the wonderful, transforming reality of how a servant’s heart expels self-centeredness and, in the process, replaces self-agendas with a renewed and repentant resolve to serve the higher purposes of God in marriage. We are God’s servants to effect His purposes in our service to our spouse, especially in times of marital trials. Therefore, as Christ’s instruments of grace, my hope is that this project will help God’s people cultivate and apply a servant’s heart in response to God as they strive to serve His higher purposes in the heat of marital conflict.

I. Introduction

A. Purpose and Relevance

1. The objective of this thesis is to explain the value of applying biblical selflessness to overcome the deceitful nature and deleterious effects of selfishness in marital conflict. As a counterintuitive response to a pattern of selfishness in marital conflict, biblical selflessness effects an indispensable expulsive power against deceitful desires warring in the heart and against the cultivation of a God-pleasing marriage.¹
2. Couples in conflict struggle with being servant-minded towards each other due to the deceitfulness of sin and the war within (Eph. 4:22; Heb. 3:13; James 4:1). A couple reacting from self-centered desires finds it counterintuitive to humble themselves by seeking to serve one another.
3. God is always up to something good in the trials and travails of marital conflict (Rom.8:28). But when selfishness eclipses selflessness in these scenarios, couples find themselves at cross-purposes with God's will to use them as servants to one another to effect His purposes in the trial. Therefore, the issue in any unchecked or ongoing marital conflict is its baneful effects on a Christian couple bringing glory to God by reflecting that glory in a husband's sacrificial love and in a wife's respectful submission in and through the trial (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:33).
4. Believers involved in marital conflict remain worshipers and servants of Jesus, so that what they harbor in their hearts and how they handle themselves in the conflict primarily reveals how they are responding to and representing Christ (Matt. 5:16;

¹ John Piper, "'The Expulsive Power of a New Affection': The Life-Changing Insight of Thomas Chalmers," *Desiring God*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection>.

- Eph. 5:21-25). That response-to-Jesus reality as His servants, in the process of marital conflict resolution, is the key to moving from counterproductive selfish responses to counterintuitive selfless responses which are constitutive of a godly marriage.
5. Self-centeredness is the antithesis of self-abnegation; self-veneration starkly contrasts with biblical self-denial on behalf of Christ (Mark 8:34). Self-denial has as its goal practical applications of God's love (1 Cor. 13:4-8). God's love is reflected in a husband and wife as a "selfless and enduring commitment of the will to care about and benefit another person by righteous, truthful, and compassionate thoughts, words and actions."²
 6. Applying Scriptural strategies of unselfishness to marital conflict creates acts of selfless service and provides a powerful biblical counter to Christians caving to selfish patterns, which tend only to compound sin issues and disconnect couples from faithfully fulfilling the one another's of Scripture. Biblical selflessness—a heart attitude of sanctified service —is a Christ-honoring response to marital conflict (e.g., being sinned against) which blesses both God, His Church, and marriages called to reflect Christ's relationship to the church (Eph. 5:22-33).

B. Intended Audience and Scope

1. This thesis project is intended as a resource for married couples, biblical counselors, pastors, and others in the church to teach and encourage selflessness as a way of repenting of sinful responses during marital strife. While the topic targets marital

² Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002), 106.

- conflict, ideally, the principles of selflessness could be applied across relational scenarios where self-centeredness is evident.
2. Two general goals are in view. First, I hope to serve biblical counselors by offering a resource to help counselees practice biblical selflessness as a counter to sinful responses during marital discord. And second, I hope to offer couples a concise biblical treatment of this topic focused on Scriptural strategies for helping them apply selfless, God-honoring responses to encounters strained by self-serving attitudes and agendas.
 3. A potential format for this research for the church and/or counseling scenarios might be a booklet or some type of stepped-learning format. It might then be used by biblical counselors as a Bible study, as an adjunct for counseling/homework assignments, etc. It might also prove helpful for someone to read and apply on their own or perhaps as a series of lessons/Bible studies for discipleship groups.

C. Research Methodology

1. The results of my research will come from careful study of Scripture, as well as library resources, internet searches, and journal articles.

II. **Defining the Problem**

The goal in this section is to identify the origin of self-serving attitudes and actions and highlight several spiritual characteristics contributing to their presence in marital conflict. The following three elements often combine or overlap so that they exacerbate other sin issues and effectively counter humble service to one's spouse in overcoming marital friction.

A. The Genesis of Selfishness

1. Self-centeredness, as seen in marital conflict, is identified explicitly in Genesis 3:16 and is rooted in the fall of mankind into sin (Gen. 3:1-7). Turning from cursing the serpent (Satan) in verses 14-15, God turned to deal with Adam and Eve. God declared that because of their sinful rebellion, self-centered preoccupation would characterize their relationship and eclipse the companionship they enjoyed with God and each other prior to their fall into sin.
2. Their marriage relationship was originally designed for complementarity and cooperation (Gen. 2:20-25) but, due to their sin reconstituting the nature of their union into selfish rebels, God pronounced that their rebellion against Him would be reflected in their relationship as they struggled against each other. The wife would default to a strong evil desire to control her husband, and from his sin nature the husband would express an equally strong desire to rule over or to master his wife.³
3. These correspondingly strong evil desires, stemming from their sin nature, are borne out in the near context of Genesis 4:7. The same Hebrew word for desire (*tesuqa*) is used in 3:16 and in 4:7. The desire of the woman to control her husband parallels sin's desire to control Cain.
4. Likewise, the Hebrew word (*masal*) translated as "rule" in 3:16, describes Adam's heart of dominion and mastery towards Eve, which are the themes commensurate with Cain's struggle to master sin in 4:7.⁴ This self-hearted power struggle was borne

³ John D. Currid, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1:1 - 25:18* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2003), 133.

⁴ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, paperback ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 146-7.

in direct consequence of Adam and Eve’s rebellion, and correspondingly, it would now characterize all marital relationships. Rebellion begets rebellion.

5. The critical point of the origin of self-centeredness is that it is an ongoing issue of our sin nature and that only God provides the needed remedy by giving us a new nature through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which God introduced in Genesis 3:15.⁵

B. The Deceitfulness of Sin and the War Within

1. Exacerbating the problem of selfishness are the effects of the deceitful lusts which counterfeit as legitimate desires (Eph. 4:22). These lusts of deceit are idols created from what we want most in the moment—even good things that we come to want too much—more than we want to serve God and fulfill His purposes. They serve as our motivators, meaning makers, and agenda-setters in any given situation, and they pollute the process of God using us in selfless service of our spouse’s best interests.
2. Believers struggle with residual or remaining sin, the spiritual reality that, while sin’s penalty and power have been overcome in Christ, sin remains an active principle operating against the Spirit within us.⁶
3. James 4:1 clearly defines the source of quarrels and relational strife (including marital conflict) as pleasures, passions, or ruling desires that wage war in our hearts. Combined with lusts of deceit from Ephesians 4:22, Scripture identifies a potent combination of deceitful wants, needs, desires, pleasures, expectations, longings,

⁵ For a theological explanation of this first mention of the gospel, see John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 250-51.

⁶ Believers continue in a spiritual battle with the deceitful nature of their hearts (cf. Jeremiah 17:9, Ecclesiastes 9:3, Romans 7, and Ephesians 4:22). Jerry Bridges’s *The Gospel for Real Life* is a reliable, helpful treatment of this topic as it relates to the gospel and is especially suited to new or spiritually immature believers.

cravings, etc., which counterfeit as legitimate pursuits. The truth is that they are usurpers of God's rule in our hearts and over our lives.⁷

4. These self-promoting desires form the context in which selflessness and self-denial make the least sense to the self-centered heart, but counterintuitively, selfless heart-attitudes carry the greatest impact for honoring God, for serving His higher purposes in the moment, and for resolving the strife in a win/win scenario.

C. The Fatuity of Spiritual Immaturity

1. Spiritual immaturity compounds selfishness, and vice-versa. A self-centered heart does not pursue spiritual growth, and it spurns the wisdom of the Lord (Prov. 18:1-2). Marrieds who neglect their spiritual growth, for whatever reasons, remain vulnerable to sin and are left to eat the fruit of their own way and to be satiated with their own devices (Prov. 1:30-31). Complacent immaturity is foolishness in God's eyes.
2. Couples tend to default to what is familiar and to remain loyal to established, well-worn paths of relating to one another, even though doing this brings them back to where they began with no resolution to their problems (Prov. 26:11).
3. They will speak of feeling trapped in a cycle of selfish bantering and of woeful sensitivity towards their spouse about certain topics or situations. Looking back on the moment of sinful selfishness, couples often sense the futility and foolishness of continuing to follow the same destructive patterns but demonstrate a lack of spiritual maturity to rightly discern a biblical way out of the selfish cycles that weigh them down.

⁷ David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 151-52.

III. Self as a Secular Sanctum

Not surprisingly, secular constructs of oneself oppose Scripture and define the locus of marital strife as a deficiency of self-love and/or trust in oneself. In secular circles, the cultivation and continuation of self-worship as a healthy self-concept is king in any relationship. Moreover, our culture's view of self is deeply rooted in self-esteem dogma, so that exalting self is ritualized as a process of self-actualization, self-discovery, self-determination, self-expression, self-fulfillment, etc. Couples are bombarded with confounding counsel on what constitutes a healthy self-concept and how it functions in marriage. This section exposes popular societal presuppositions behind the promotion of self as a personal right and a relational necessity, and conversely provides several biblical passages as confutation of these worldly postulates.

A. Exalting Self as a Right

1. In secular literature and media self-esteem is big business and is greatly touted as the basis for healthy and happy relationships. Currently, Amazon's most popularly read book on self-esteem is psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden's *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*. By his definition, the essence of self-esteem is "to trust one's mind and to know that one is worthy of happiness (cf. Prov. 3:5-7; 14:12)."⁸
2. Branden's overall premise is that self-esteem is a fundamental human need. Self-esteem is, primarily, confidence in ourselves and in our ability to think, choose, and act in ways that support our right to be successful and happy. Brandon summarizes self-esteem as "the *feeling* of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts."⁹

⁸ Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem* (New York: Bantam Press, 1994), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3; emphasis added.

3. In relation to intimate relationships such as marriage, Branden declares, “if I enjoy a fundamental sense of efficacy and worth, and experience myself as lovable, *then* I have a foundation for appreciating and loving others.”¹⁰

B. Defending Selfishness as a Virtue

1. Author Ayn Rand remains an influential voice among modern purveyors of the value of self. Her many books and articles have generated a love/hate relationship with her colleagues in the ranks of the soft sciences of psychology and philosophy. Her book, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, has been a staple of modern philosophical study and debate for more than fifty years. At its heart, her philosophy of objectivism clearly asserts that, “To redeem both man and morality, it is the concept of ‘*selfishness*’ that one has to redeem.”¹¹
2. Selfishness is concern with one’s own self-interests, a dictionary definition Rand adopts to tout her own definition of a new concept of egoism—a rational selfishness (i.e., a preoccupation with what is best for me, and which eschews all forms of self-sacrifice on behalf of others). In fact, any attack on selfishness is an attack on one’s self-esteem, so that surrendering one means giving up the other.¹²
3. Similarly, Glennon Doyle has struck a chord with the consciences of millions. Her book, *Untamed*, is currently the #7 best seller in Amazon’s Christian Self Help category and spent the last ninety-one weeks on the New York Times Best Sellers

¹⁰ Ibid., 8; emphasis added.

¹¹ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Penguin, 1964), x; italics in original.

¹² Rand, xi.

list, currently ranking tenth.¹³ Boasting close to one million followers on both Facebook and Instagram, her influence is clear.¹⁴

4. Her manifesto of self declares the following: “Maybe Eve was never meant to be our warning. Maybe she was meant to be our model. Own your wanting. Eat the apple. Let it burn.”¹⁵ Consequently, her advice for female fulfillment is: “We do not need more selfless women. What we need right now is more women who have detoxed themselves so completely from the world’s expectations that they are full of nothing but themselves. What we need are women who are full of themselves.”¹⁶

C. Self Esteem as a Modern-Day Reformation

1. Theologian Robert Thomas refers to “self-exaltation anthropology” as the “dominant advice coming from most Christian psychologists and counselors.”¹⁷ He describes this view as having a love for self, a high view of one’s own self-worth, or having high self-esteem—the typical nomenclature of Christian integrationists.
2. Thomas cites Robert Schuller’s teachings as typical of the way self-esteem dogma is expressed. He suggests that Schuller’s ideas and prescriptions laid much of the groundwork for modern-day emphases on valuing self as the basis for valuing others.

¹³ “Hardcover Nonfiction,” Best Sellers, New York Times, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/hardcover-nonfiction/>.

¹⁴ Glennon Doyle, Facebook, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/glennondoyle>; Glennon Doyle (@glennondoyle), Instagram, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/glennondoyle/>.

¹⁵ Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: The Dial Press, 2020), 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷ Robert L. Thomas, *Who Am I: The Christian Hunger for Self-Identity* (Ross-Shire, GB: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 11. This work was my foundational resource on Christian identity. As Thomas credits Robert Schuller’s book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982), for elucidating the misplaced theology of self-exaltation, I’ve adapted Schuller’s title for this section’s heading.

3. One of Schuller's most pernicious propositions argued that the Protestant reformation, was wrong-footed; the emphasis of the Reformers should have been centered not on God, but on man. From the foundation of the dignity of man (a dignity apart from God) Schuller argued for a renewed emphasis on meeting what he claimed is man's deepest need—the "will to self-worth."¹⁸
4. Moreover, Schuller identifies the pearl of great price (from Matthew 13:45-46) as "genuine self-respect and self-esteem" demonstrating not only his weak hermeneutic, but even worse, turning Jesus's teaching of the supreme value of gaining the Kingdom of God at all personal costs (losing self to gain self cf. Matt. 10:39; 16:24-26), into a man-centered message of the supreme value of self over all other things.¹⁹
5. An example of Thomas's warning that hits closer to biblical counseling can be found in this definition proffered by Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins: "Self-esteem refers to an inner sense of worthiness that gives a person resilience and resistance to attack or criticism."²⁰
6. While the authors offer some helpful suggestions, their eisegesis betrays the integrationist tenor of their instruction and puts an unbiblical emphasis on God's concern with our self-esteem.
7. For example, in assessing a client's desire for healing their self-esteem, the authors reference John 5 (the account of Jesus healing a man suffering from paralysis for

¹⁸ Thomas, *Who Am I?*, 12.

¹⁹ Richard P. Belcher, "The Impossibility Thinking of Robert Schuller," *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 6, no. 4 (1983): 59, <https://www.ccef.org/my-account/jbc/0604/book-review-the-impossibility-thinking-of-robert-schuller/>. In addition to being a helpful critique of Schuller's hermeneutic and aberrant theology applied to the view of self, Belcher's review fundamentally exposes the weaknesses and basic flaws of integrationist hermeneutics.

²⁰ Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *The Quick Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling: Personal and Emotional Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 214.

- thirty-eight years) to teach that Jesus asked the lame man if he wanted to be healed because “a person can live so long with brokenness that he or she may not want to do the work that it takes to receive healing.”²¹
8. This represents a “psychologizing interpretation” which is not the direction of the narrative; the story illustrates the power of Jesus’s words as the Son of God and sets the stage for the Sabbath dispute that ensues between Jesus and the religious leaders.²²
 9. Far from being isolated cases, these examples of psychologizing the text illustrate how self-esteem anthropology negatively influences Scriptural interpretation, consequently mislabeling psychologized helping approaches as biblical counseling.

D. Scriptural Perspectives on the Worship of Self-Worth

1. Conversely, Scripture refutes man-centered notions such as redeeming mankind and morality by redeeming selfishness, the necessity of loving self, or the right to uncensored self-expression (cf., Eph. 4:15, 29; Phil. 2:1-11; 1 John 3:23; 4:7-11). Indeed, the most pernicious and seductive idea ensuring the ruin of relationships is that it is all about you.²³
2. The Bible assumes that we love ourselves, and that self-love and self-serving attitudes form the basis for the problems of not loving and serving others (Eph. 5:29, 33). Scripture commands us to love God with all our being, and then to turn to love others as the highest expression of God’s design for human relationships—our love for God

²¹ Ibid., 216

²² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 243-44.

²³ David M. Doran, *For the Sake of His Name* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 1.

must be much stronger than anything temporal, including ourselves (Matt. 22:38-40; 1 John 3:16).

3. Moreover, 2 Timothy 3:1-5 fixes love of self as the root from which brutality, vice, arrogance, disobedience, ingratitude, clashing, malice, hate, treachery, conceit, gossip, and all manner of human evil derive. Loving ourselves, in its many expressions of idolatry, is our greatest problem; Scripture never tells us to pursue a lifestyle or personal pattern of learning to love ourselves, because “where...selfish ambition exist[s], there is disorder and every evil thing” (James 3:16).

IV. **Looking to Our Sufficient Savior: Indicatives, Identity, and Self-Denying Responses**

Self-denial is a work of God’s grace (Phil. 2:5), and its application in marriage is a powerful biblical prescription against self-glorification (Mark 8:34; Eph. 5:31-33). Jesus experienced conflict, but never sinned, and He always remained faithful to God’s purposes in the lives of those whom He served—even in the confrontational conditions created by those who made themselves His enemies (e.g., Mark 3:1-6, 20-35; 14:43-50). The goal of this section is to highlight biblical benefits of our spiritual union with Christ (i.e., the indicatives of Scripture) which motivate us to emulate Him from self-denying devotion, and in submission to His purposes for our marriage as His servants.

A. The Believer’s Condition in Christ

1. Scripture says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away, behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Far from being a remake of a better me, or a reimagining of my best self, *new* has the idea of being different in quality, such that God has now established the believer as a new kind of person with new desires, ideas, and truths. This new self, “created in righteousness and holiness of

- the truth” (Eph. 4:24), “as it is nourished and developed, helps believers gain victory in the battle against sin and conforms them to the image of Jesus Christ.”²⁴
2. As believing couples strain against the temptations of remaining sin and strive towards holiness in the power God supplies (Col. 1:29), they need to carefully conclude that “one died for all, therefore all died, and he died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor. 5:14-15).²⁵
 3. Dead people do not sin! Our death in Jesus released us from sin’s authority, so that sin no longer has a claim or a power over us. That is our new status in God’s eyes as it relates to our former selves. And yet, just as we are dead to sin through Jesus’s crucifixion, we are also spiritually alive in Him through His resurrection.
 4. Romans 6 is a running treatise on the death/life paradox characterizing believers in their spiritual union with Jesus. What happened to Jesus in His death and resurrection happened to every believer, so that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ.²⁶ It is vital that couples calculate and participate in the new life Christ is for

²⁴ John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 196.

²⁵ Theologically, our spiritual union with Jesus makes selflessness a reality, as Paul Barnett explains, “The “no longer” signals the turning point of the aeons from the “former” to the “new” creation (cf. Isa 43:18) and from the “old” to the “new” covenant (see 3:3–6). Thus, the solidarity of humankind with Adam in his sin (cf. Rom 5:10), that is, his self-centeredness, is broken. Those who belong to Christ *no longer* live for themselves but for him. Because Paul lives for Christ, not himself, he lives and dies for the Corinthians (v. 13; 4:12, 15).” Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 292–293. Also, “**He died for everyone**... Paul here refers to those who no longer live under the power of the life of “self” (lit., “flesh,” *sarx* [4561, 4922]; see Rom 8:1–9; Gal 5:16–21), but live the new life of Christ, ‘who died and was raised for them’ on their behalf. Reminding the Corinthians that Jesus died for all his people, Paul insisted that the same people are summoned to die with and in him... This is not a physical death, but a spiritual one in the sense of denying one’s selfish interests and desires.” Ralph P. Martin and Carl N. Toney, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 15, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 316–317.

²⁶ Thomas, *Who Am I?*, 22.

them. He is the life, so that the life we now live is not ours but His—His gift of life is Himself living and abiding in us (John 14:6; 15:1-11; Gal. 2:20).

B. The Believer’s Calling in Christ

1. It is not self-reliance but Savior-reliance that we are called to cultivate. Indeed, in Jesus’s paradigm of followship, the intentional loss of self is the only way to gain life (Mark 8:34ff.). When He calls us to deny ourselves, it is not “the denial of something to the self, but the denial of the self itself.”²⁷
2. Jesus modeled this self-denial on behalf of God and the church, and the Bible calls believers to emulate His submission, humility, and sacrificial service (Phil. 2:8; Eph. 5:21). The pathway for experiencing unity in marriage corresponds to the way unity is cultivated in the church; each spouse must strive in God’s power to do “nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). In verses 6-7 Paul put forward Jesus as our example in humbling and denying Himself in His sacrificial service to others.²⁸
3. In response to a conflict among the disciples where they were pressing their agendas through pride, envy, and indignation Jesus admonished them with two parallel calls to heaven’s higher ways of selflessness (Mark 10:43-45).

²⁷ Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield, Department of Biblical Studies, The University of Sheffield: J.S.O.T. Press, 1981), 36, quoted in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 340.

²⁸ Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential* (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2021), 143.

- a) The first is summed up with “whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you, shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44). The higher ways of heaven dictate that the “preeminent virtue of God’s kingdom is not power, not even freedom, but service.”²⁹
- b) In the second, Jesus said of Himself, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). As followers of Jesus, husbands and wives are called to serve each other, because it is the nature and way of the Lord who lives in them and calls them to joyful obedience.³⁰

C. The Believer’s Conduct in Christ

1. Condition, calling, and conduct come together as the apostle Paul urges that as we “have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (Col. 2:6) And in verse 10, Paul tells us we have been brought to fullness (completeness) in Christ. We can live out of what we already possess: the spiritual riches of the fullness of Jesus.³¹
2. Couples sacrificially serve each other from their rich spiritual resources of the new self, “which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:24). We are drawing on the resources of Christ’s life in us (the new self) so that we are putting our devotion for Jesus into motion.

²⁹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 326.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Allan Chapple, *True Devotion: In Search of Authentic Spirituality* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2014), 230.

3. Thus, what we say and do in relationship to our spouse is drawn not from the resources of a healthy self-esteem nor from a sense of our own worthiness, but from the treasures of our fullness in God's Son who is living in us to sanctify (shape and sustain us) in His likeness (Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 3:18).
4. Our worthiness is the gracious consequence of God loving us and imputing the righteousness of Jesus to us (1 John 4:19; Phil. 3:9). Our emphasis on Jesus as our righteousness and our focus on His worthiness being credited to us by grace through faith form the basis for our obedience as servants to one another. Our selfless responses to one another overflow from our life being rooted and grounded in the love and grace of Christ and being filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:17, 19).
5. It is Jesus we are to focus our hearts and minds on, it is Him we are to look to, trust in, adore, and consider worthy to receive all glory, honor, and praise (Col. 3:1-2; Rev. 5:13). We are made worthy in Him, and we live and move and have our being in Him (Acts 17:28). Thus, we are privileged to be imitators of God as His beloved children; we are to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us (Eph. 5:1-2).³² The wonderful reality of our new life in Christ is that we are now able to obey.

V. Looking to the Sufficient Scripture: Imperatives, Identity, and Self-Denying Responses

What Jesus has worked *in us by grace* must be worked *out of us by grace* to the greater glory of God. We are called to strive in holiness, so that *who* we are in Christ becomes *how* we live for Christ. The primary aim of this section is to encourage couples to view their responses

³² Christians maintain their individual identities even in their union with Christ. Allan Chapple's emphasis on the "mutual in-ness" of our union with Jesus is helpful: "We are in the Lord, and He is in us. But at the same time, we must be careful that we do not give the impression that this union involved some kind of merging of identities.... The relationship is not one in which our personal identity disappears; rather, it is a real fellowship between persons." Chapple, *True Devotion*, 83. For a helpful summation of five characteristics of the believer's union with Christ, see also John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 607.

during marital conflict as divinely ordained opportunities to reflect the character and will of Jesus through selfless service to one another.

A. Loving for Christ's Sake

1. Love for Jesus controls us in spiritual living as we live out what God has put in (John 15:12-17; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 1 John 4:9-11). God's love defines a couple's spiritual union with Christ, and by God's grace that union of love is worked out in marriage as tangible expressions of selfless service to the greater glory of God. We are not commanded to live out of love for ourselves; instead, we are instructed to live in love for our Savior and to express that godly love to one another (Matt. 22:37-39; Gal. 2:20).³³
2. In 1 Corinthians 13:5, we see love and selflessness come together in the context of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts—love “does not seek its own” (i.e., is not self-seeking). In 1 Corinthians 10:24 Paul commands, “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor,” and in the greater context of Paul's emphases in chapters 8-10, love counters self-seeking as believers seek, not their own agendas, but that of building up, edifying, or benefitting others on behalf of Christ.³⁴

³³ And in terms of one's motivation to deny self and serve others, Colin Kruse adds this from 2 Cor. 5:15, “The possibility that those who have benefited from Christ's death and resurrection should revert to living for themselves is ever present, and was the path actually taken by a number of Paul's associates (Phil. 2:21; 2 Tim. 4:10). What kept Paul on the right path, and will keep us there too, is an awareness of the exceptional character of Christ's love for us. We love him and desire to live for him as we realize that he loved us and gave himself for us (Gal. 2:20).” Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 8, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 122.

³⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Your Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-by-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978), 73.

3. While marital conflict tempts us to selfishness, couples expressing God's love to each other during conflict make an especially powerful display of denying self and loving for Jesus's sake (Mark 8:35).
4. The Lord Jesus commanded believers to love one another even as He loves us and gave Himself for us (John 13:34; cf. 1 John 4:10-11). As we show His love to each other we give credible testimony that we belong to Him. Our acts of love reflect the love Christ has for us.
5. Paul commanded wives and husbands to love each other in ways Jesus shows His love for them (Eph. 5:21-25; 33).
6. Because He loves us, Jesus desires our joy (John 15:11; 17:13). The mutual intimacy which God's love brings to marriage means that couples can experience a love which finds shared joy in the joy of the other.³⁵
7. The world prioritizes personal happiness and deems getting one's own way as essential in this pursuit. Conversely, the love of the Lord compels us to selflessness as we set ourselves to be helpers of the joy of our spouse, and as we find joy in the joy they experience (2 Cor. 1:24; 2:3).³⁶

B. Submitting for Christ's Sake

1. God tells all believers to be in a humble attitude of mutual submission to each other in the fear of Christ (Eph. 5:21). Without mutual submission and deep reverence for

³⁵ Jim Berg, *Changed into His Image: God's Plan for Transforming Your Life* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2000) 117.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

- Jesus, marriage (indeed, any relationship) devolves into “power plays that bring dysfunction.”³⁷
2. The instructions Paul gives in Ephesians 5:22 - 6:9 regarding godly relationships depend on this heart attitude of Spirit-filled submission in respect for Christ. The Greek word, *hupotasso*, translates as “be subject” (submit to) in the NASB. It has the idea of “relinquishing one’s rights to another.”³⁸ This is the way of Spirit-filled living, where a husband seeks to build up his wife while he descends in humility, and vice-versa.³⁹
 3. A contrite, submissive, meek, and humble heart carries the expulsive power of an attitude of ongoing repentance (sensitivity to turn from personal sin) as a foundational response to God in marital conflict. This submissive response to the Lord and His will becomes the tap where a couple can drink in the goodness of God in expressions of heartfelt service to each other.⁴⁰

C. Serving for Christ’s Sake

1. Creed and conduct come together in beautiful and powerful portraits of selfless service in Romans 12-15.⁴¹ While Paul’s instruction in these chapters is not specific to marriage, it is certainly applicable in principle to husbands and wives.

³⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 167.

³⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 276.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 117-118.

⁴¹ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 317.

2. In Romans 15:1-3 Paul speaks about a spiritually mature Christian bearing the weaknesses of a less mature Christian. While a couple might share relatively equal levels of spiritual maturity, during marital conflict, any sinful behavior demonstrates weakness in that moment and in that issue. This is a time for bearing with one another in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1) and Paul offers several important spiritual characteristics to help in that process.
- a) Honoring one another: He calls on the spiritually stronger person to help the sinning (or weaker) person carry that weakness, “by not being critical or condescending and by showing respect...”.⁴² It has the idea that “We should put our shoulders under these failings, and meaningfully help our weak fellow-believers to carry them.”⁴³
 - b) This is not an acceptance of sinful behavior, but an effort to refrain from selfish responses and to be “devoted to one another in brotherly love [and to] give preference to one another in honor” (Rom. 12:10).
 - c) Humbling ourselves: Paul adds, “... and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” This is selflessness which carefully and patiently considers a response or action which will be in the best interest of the other person, especially considering their particular display of weakness.

⁴² John MacArthur, *Romans 9-16*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 308.

⁴³ William Hendriksen, *Romans: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981) 469.

- d) Following Jesus's example: Paul then uses the example of Jesus in verse three to point out that even the Lord did not seek His own best or pleasure, but He willingly submitted Himself to serve what was best in the sight of God the Father in Christ's redemptive mission on earth.
3. Following on a series of injunctions in Romans 12 where Paul calls on believers to live holy lives and offer selfless service to others, even to those who hurt us in various ways, he sums up his instructions with "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21).
- a) To sin against our spouse for being sinned against is to double the sin (to compound it) and to be overcome by it in that situation.
- b) But to overcome evil with good is to take the offensive against personal sin and to overcome what is threatening the good of serving Christ and others in a spirit of love.⁴⁴
4. Christian couples can find themselves struggling in cycles of selfishness which have been reinforced in repeated episodes of conflict over time; Romans 13:14 can offer them a way out of this cycle of sin to which they default and even come to expect.
- a) To "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" means to put into practice a believer's new spiritual identity, to outwardly wear the spiritual clothes of our union with Jesus.⁴⁵ It pictures a person donning the divine clothing of the virtues of Jesus as we become more like Him in attitude, word, and deed.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Stott, *Romans*, 337.

⁴⁵ Hendriksen makes putting on Christ practical, reminding us "to deck yourselves more and more with the robe of Christ's righteousness, so that whenever Satan reminds you of your sinfulness, you immediately remind him and yourselves of your new standing with God." Hendriksen, *Romans*, 443.

⁴⁶ MacArthur, *Romans 9-16*, 268.

- b) To “make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” conveys the idea of not planning for sin, of not conforming to it or of becoming comfortable with it.⁴⁷
- Couples need to repent of wrong ideas, desires, expectations, and lists of wrongdoing that linger in their hearts towards their spouse, and which fuel the flesh and the cycle of selfishness.

VI. **Counseling for Selfless Service**

Biblical attitudes and actions must work in tandem to effectively expel selfishness and promote selflessness. The counterintuitive nature of self-denial calls for Scriptural strategies reflecting putting on the new self; these strategies are grounded in one’s relationship to Christ and expressed in tangible acts of Christlike selflessness (combining both the indicatives and imperatives). This section outlines a three-fold approach to Scripturally putting off (expelling) selfish desires by putting on biblical selflessness, so that a believer can persevere in faithfulness to God’s purposes for being an instrument of His grace in resolving marital conflict.

A. Scripture, Saints, and Selfless Service (Encouraging and Affirming Together)⁴⁸

Selfishness keeps couples focused on the problems, failures, and weaknesses in their marriage. This section of the homework is designed to help them cooperate in ways God is blessing them, working to grow them in grace, and conforming them to Christlikeness. The specific emphasis is instructing a believing couple in identifying heart issues and applying Scriptural strategies for selflessly serving one another as fellow saints, sufferers, and sinners.

⁴⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988) 474.

⁴⁸ Michael R. Emler, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 8. This section’s titles are drawn from this book where the author states that these three categories are how God sees His children, are true of every Christian, ought to guide our approach to relationships, and serve as “signposts for wise love.”

1. In my experience, many couples do not spend time together in Scripture.
Consequently, these couples generally lag in Bible study skills. Assignments designed to get them in the Word together are essential.
2. One basic assignment that I've used to good effect is to get them looking into Proverbs as it relates to several issues we've decided to work on.⁴⁹
 - a) Having biblically identified the issues to be addressed, ask them to carefully read the first three chapters of Proverbs (together), writing down each verse which speaks directly and clearly to those issues(s). If a chapter doesn't mention the issues, then move on. I generally will identify three problems or areas of concern from the marriage (issues from each spouse) to help ensure that they will likely find at least one of these mentioned in most of the chapters.
 - b) Observe and write down all that the verse says about the issues we are discussing. Are there contrasts/comparisons being made? What is the context of your verse (those before and after)? Is the verse prescribing an action, attitude, or some aspect of warning about the issue? Basic observation questions, limited to just a few to start, are sufficient. I keep it simple, and I set them up for success by giving clear instructions that are challenging for their level of ability.
 - c) I always include the fear of the Lord as one of the topics I want them to look for because I want to talk to them about the ways Proverbs uses the fear of the Lord to remedy foolishness and sinful habits and point the way to wise living.
 - d) This is a non-intimidating exercise that gets them into the Word together and on the same page (literally) looking for and talking about God's wisdom. I flex the

⁴⁹ The paradigm described here can apply to any book of the Bible, but I've found Proverbs to be user-friendly in this exercise, and the fear of the Lord is very helpful as a foundation for growing in grace.

discussion and emphases based on what I hear from them when we talk about the homework in session, also adjusting the guidelines to their needs.

- e) For example, if this generates discussion that devolves into blaming and criticism, I make a rule to keep that from recurring, etc. I make a point of asking them how this verse helps them better understand the issue? Then, I ask them questions about how we can apply the wisdom to their relationship?
- f) After doing this for a few sessions, and as they progress in skill and confidence, I might ask them to begin to write down how they can apply the wisdom to their marriage and/or parenting, or to come up with three ways they can support each other in walking in the fear of the Lord this next week, etc. And I praise and affirm them for every instance of support and edification they offer each other through this experience. This is helping them move from selfishness to selflessness as they share in ways to spiritually affirm each other.
- g) This can carry on through the entire book, or I might suspend it to focus on other assignments, but generally, I keep this going while assigning some sort of reading or practical exercise in applying the material.⁵⁰
- h) Throughout any of these Scriptural exercises, any verse or passage can be employed for memorization. I will typically assign an anchor verse, a key verse that captures the main idea of the passage and/or my emphasis for the homework.

⁵⁰ Reading and answering questions from sections of the following books can be helpful adjuncts to Scripture assignments: Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*; Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners* (Greensboro: NC: New Growth Press, 2021); Ken Sande, *Peacemaking for Families* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2002); Wayne A. Mack, *Your Family God's Way* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1991).

3. Couples need to recognize worshiping together as a matter of everyday life. I want to help them work together in this as saints, as fellow heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7). I share with them some of the biblical mandates which speak to offering ourselves in worship to God in all we are and do for His glory (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17). These passages can also be used as homework assignments with questions to help them glean the main ideas and apply the text to their lives.
4. From this foundation, I can use 1 Thessalonians 5:11 as the capstone of a study of verses 1-11, applying the skills they honed during the Proverbs study. Verses 1-10 “encourage expectant and responsible Christian living” considering that Christians have been delivered from the wrath of God, here expressed on the Day of the Lord.⁵¹
5. This common deliverance is a gift of grace they share together in Christ. The gospel expressed in verses 9-10 is their shared heritage and the power for their relationship of serving each other. As such, they also share in the privilege and responsibility of living in their marriage as a gift of thanks to God - are they laboring in love together toward that end and making the best use of this common gift, together?
6. Here again, the emphasis is on the application of the gospel as an expulsive force against selfish patterns they’ve formed over time. The truth of their joint union in Christ and their oneness of spirit unites them in the greater enterprise of glorifying God *together* as they serve one another (Gal 3:28-29; 1 Pet. 3:7).⁵²

⁵¹ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, vol. 33, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 169.

⁵² *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners*, page 34, offers a good characterization of Emler’s emphasis on highlighting God’s good works of grace in each other. This list can serve several helpful purposes: it can give couples tangible expressions of the aim of serving each other as saints; it can help couples better understand the process of applying selflessness to marriage; and it is a good blend of how couples can love, know, speak, and do in conjunction with the overall approach found in Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002).

7. Ephesians 5:21-33 is a key passage for helping couples grasp God's love as it applies to husbands and wives engaging in selfless service aligned with Jesus' love and sacrificial service. Other passages can reinforce the character of Christ's love and submission and offer examples of a put-off and put-on motif (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, Philippians 2:1-11, and Colossians 3:8-14).

B. Scripture, Sufferers, and Selfless Service (Bearing and Comforting in Weakness Together)

1. 1 Corinthians 10:13 helps me connect with the pain and suffering of a couple, to show empathy, offer hope, and to begin to expose the deceitful lusts/lies lurking behind the issues of contention in their relationship. I can use this verse within the first couple of sessions, or I can wait and use it after I've done some work with them in serving each other as saints.
 - a) Having them answer, "what are the four declarations Paul makes in this verse?" will help them think a bit more pointedly about what this verse is saying.⁵³
 - b) Questions corresponding to each declaration are designed to help them consider unbiblical ways they have been thinking about and responding to their suffering. But this exercise also shows that I'm taking time to identify and to address biblically the reality of the pain they both have suffered by the conflict.
 - c) For example, with declaration one, "No temptation has overtaken you..." questions could be, "Have you been tempted to think that your situation is unique? In what ways do you think your situation is unique? Have you been

⁵³ This approach is outlined in Tripp, *Instruments*, 312. I'll only provide an example of declaration number one here.

tempted to think that God is punishing you, or that your suffering is somehow the result of God being mad at you?”

2. 1 Peter 2:18-5:10 is rich with biblical wisdom on suffering to help put into perspective aspects of suffering in a broken world among broken people. This teaching could be correlated with Galatians 6:7-8 to help balance the Bible’s perspective regarding how we bring about our own suffering by consequence (i.e., by reaping what we sow).⁵⁴
3. Due to the counterintuitive nature of selfless service in the throes of conflict, Romans 15:1-3 and Galatians 6:1-4 can combine to show Scriptural wisdom for bearing with the weaknesses of others on behalf of Christ. The central feature to be emphasized is knowing, following, and pleasing Jesus as a mutual privilege of sharing in the love of Christ.
 - a) Romans 15:1-3 is set in the context of what Paul has just talked about in chapter fourteen, that we are to bear with and not judge spiritually weaker brothers and sisters in Christ. The aim of the passage is to follow the example of Jesus and put one’s shoulder under the weak brother or sister right at the point of their weakness.
 - b) Similarly, Galatians 6:1-4 encourages a husband and wife to restore each other in a spirit of gentleness and to bear each other’s burdens in fulfilling the law of Christ, that is, Jesus’s mandate that we humbly love each other even as He has first loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 4:19).

⁵⁴ Tripp, *Instruments*, 280.

4. This could provide an opportunity for a study in Mark 7:18-23, answering the basic question of where does sin come from? This introduces more formally the issue of our hearts as the source of sin and provides a good transition to the next section of serving each other as sinners.

C. Scripture, Sinners, and Selfless Service (Forgiving and Repenting Together)

1. Indwelling sin is a reality that Christians feel and experience but struggle to understand and successfully battle. The past can haunt couples with shame, guilt, and a sense of failure. And habitual sinful attitudes and behavior can be powerful deterrents to self-denial and sacrificial love.
2. However, couples need to maintain servant's hearts toward one another in times of being sinned against. The heart is the key, and passages like Proverbs 4:23; Luke 6:39-45; Ephesians 4:17-24; and James 4:1-2 could be used successively or in combination to teach about the issues of root and fruit and how this relates to marital conflict.
3. The Three Trees diagram (Appendix 3) could also be used to offer a picture of the operations in the process of moving from sinful root and fruit to love through the gospel.
4. To bolster the process of understanding and foster personal application, a case study using Euodia and Syntyche can help illustrate a practical step-by-step application of love and forgiveness to being sinned against by one's spouse (Phil. 4:2-3)⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Wayne Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 193-212. Chapter nine uses this case study to offer practical wisdom and application for nurturing unity in situations of conflict.

5. In addition, Colossians 3:12-14 and James 5:16 give biblical examples of how we can encourage couples in love and forgiveness as a way of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14).
5. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 help couples unite in their focus and efforts against bitterness, resentment, malice, unforgiveness, etc., to follow through on their commitments to build up one another in the love of Christ.⁵⁶
6. Finally, I have had good success with teaching on the fear of the Lord regardless of the issue the counselee struggles with. With a couple, this central theme of devotion to God by nurturing a high and holy reverence in one's heart for Him is of incalculable spiritual benefit. Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are the go-to books of Scripture for studying the fear of the Lord.⁵⁷

VII. Conclusion

A. The Example of Jesus

1. Mark 10:45 wonderfully summarizes Jesus's selflessness, His mission, and His heart for honoring the Father, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom of many."
2. The context is the disciples' disputations about having the places of honor in the Kingdom and their indignation towards James and John for being the first to ask Jesus

⁵⁶ Both Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004) and *Peacemaking for Families* are chock-full of wise counsel and practical exercises for dealing with unforgiveness, steps to forgiveness, reconciliation, biblically addressing heart issues, etc. See also Emler, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners*, part four, pp.117-164.

⁵⁷ To help with an introductory and yet fulfilling treatment on the fear of the Lord, chapter one of *Your Family God's Way* is well-structured for creating homework assignments. From here, *When People are Big and God is Small* by Ed Welch is the definitive help for moving from the fear of man to the fear of the Lord. Welch's treatment on the fear of the Lord applied to relationships is gold.

for these places of honor. Their contention and conflict were pronounced displays of selfishness and a lack of love for the Lord and each other.

3. Jesus's rebuke and subsequent instruction in verses 42-45 made clear that the path to greatness in God's eyes is the path of selfless servanthood. It is a matter of following Him in love and faithfulness.

B. The Exhortation of Jesus

1. Set in the context of Judas's betrayal, in John 13:34 Jesus commands all who follow Him to love each other in keeping with the love He has for them.
2. Paul would pick up on this same theme in Ephesians 5:1, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."
3. Just as Jesus served the Father and sought to please Him, our highest motive for selflessness is pleasing the Lord by walking in the love of Christ as beloved children of God even as we seek to serve one another (cf. Col. 1:10).

C. The Expulsive Emulation of Jesus

1. With all that was weighing on Him, Jesus's selflessness and servant's heart are seen in John 13:3-17 when He washed the feet of His disciples just before His arrest. His words to His disciples still carry the weight of a couple's obedience to Him, "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you."
2. Dealing with the deceitfulness of remaining sin waging war in a couple's hearts, Paul calls on them to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (Rom. 14:13). Putting on the Lord Jesus (i.e., wearing His spiritual

- union to us as armor of light, v.12) directs the focus of our efforts in cultivating a humble selflessness out of devotion to the Lord.
3. The expulsive power of selflessness against selfishness and pride during marital conflict is effective only if that selflessness is rooted and grounded in love for Christ (Eph. 3:17-19). We are God's beloved in Christ; following on Jesus's example, it is both our spiritual privilege and sacred duty to selflessly serve our spouse even in their times of sinful weakness towards us (cf. Rom. 5:6, 8).
 4. God's love is others-oriented, and His love overcomes and endures. Love for one's spouse must carry those same qualities—the kind of love where a friend loves at all times—especially in times of conflict, adversity, and sinful weakness (1 Cor. 13:7; Prov. 17:17).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Wayne A. Mack, *Maximum Impact* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2010), 268.

Bibliography

- Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle of the Corinthians*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997.
- Belcher, Richard P. "The Impossibility Thinking of Robert Schuller." *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 6, no. 4 (1983): <https://www.ccef.org/my-account/jbc/0604/book-review-the-impossibility-thinking-of-robert-schuller/>.
- Best, Ernest. *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. Sheffield, Department of Biblical Studies, The University of Sheffield: J.S.O.T. Press, 1981. Quoted in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 10. Edited by Schnabel, Eckhard J. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019.
- Berg, Jim. *Changed Into His Image: God's Plan for Transforming Your Life*. Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2000.
- Branden, Nathaniel. *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem*. New York: Bantam Press, 1994.
- Bridges, Jerry. *The Gospel for Real Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003.
- Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991.
- Chapple, Allan. *True Devotion: In Search of Authentic Spirituality*. London: The Latimer Trust, 2014.
- Clinton, Tim and Ron Hawkins. *The Quick Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling: Personal and Emotional Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009.
- Currid, John D. *Genesis*. Vol. 1, *Genesis 1:1 - 25:18*. Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2003.
- Doran, David M. *For the Sake of His Name*. Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018.
- Doyle, Glennon. *Untamed*. New York: The Dial Press, 2020.
- Emlet, Michael R. *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021.

- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Hansen, Collin and Jonathan Leeman. *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.
- Hendriksen, William. *Romans: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981.
- MacArthur, John, and Richard Mayhue, eds. *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
- MacArthur, John. *2 Corinthians*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003.
- . *Ephesians*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986.
- . *Romans 9-16*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994.
- Mack, Wayne, and Dave Swavely. *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006.
- Mack, Wayne A. *Maximum Impact: Living and Loving for God's Glory*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010.
- . *Your Family God's Way*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002.
- Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995.
- Martin, Ralph P. and Carl N. Toney. *2 Corinthians*. Vol. 15, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009.
- Morris, Leon. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids. MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988.
- Piper, John. "‘The Expulsive Power of a New Affection’: The Life-Changing Insight of Thomas Chalmers." *Desiring God*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection>.
- Powlison, David. *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture*. Phillipsburg, NJ:P&R Publishing, 2003.
- Rand, Ayn. *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: Penguin, 1964.

- Ross, Allen P. *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*. paperback ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.
- Sande, Ken. *Peacemaking for Families*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2002.
- . *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conduct*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004.
- Scott, Stuart. *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective*. Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002.
- Stott, John. *Romans: God's Good News for the World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995.
- Thomas, Robert L. *Understanding Your Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-by-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12-14*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978.
- . *Who Am I: The Christian Hunger for Self-Identity*. Ross-shire, GB: Christian Focus Publications, 2002.
- Troxel, A. Craig. *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.
- Tripp, Paul David. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002.
- Welch, Edward T. *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.

Appendix 1: Wisdom Homework for Couples

Carefully read through Proverbs 1-3 together, watching for verses that address the issues of [fear of the Lord, anger, etc.]. List those verses below.

• _____

• _____

• _____

• _____

• _____

Still working together, look back at those verses to observe and write down all that each verse says about the issues. Are there contrasts/comparisons being made? What is the context of your verse (see verses before and after)? Is the verse prescribing an action, attitude, or warning about the issue?

How can you apply this wisdom to your attitudes/actions in your marriage?

How can you support your spouse in walking in the fear of the Lord this week?

Appendix 2: Scripture for Counseling toward Selflessness

Encouraging and Affirming Together

- 1 Peter 3:7
- Romans 12:1-2
- 1 Corinthians 10:31
- Colossians 3:17
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
- Galatians 3:28-29
- Ephesians 5:21-33
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8
- Philippians 2:1-11
- Colossians 3:8-14

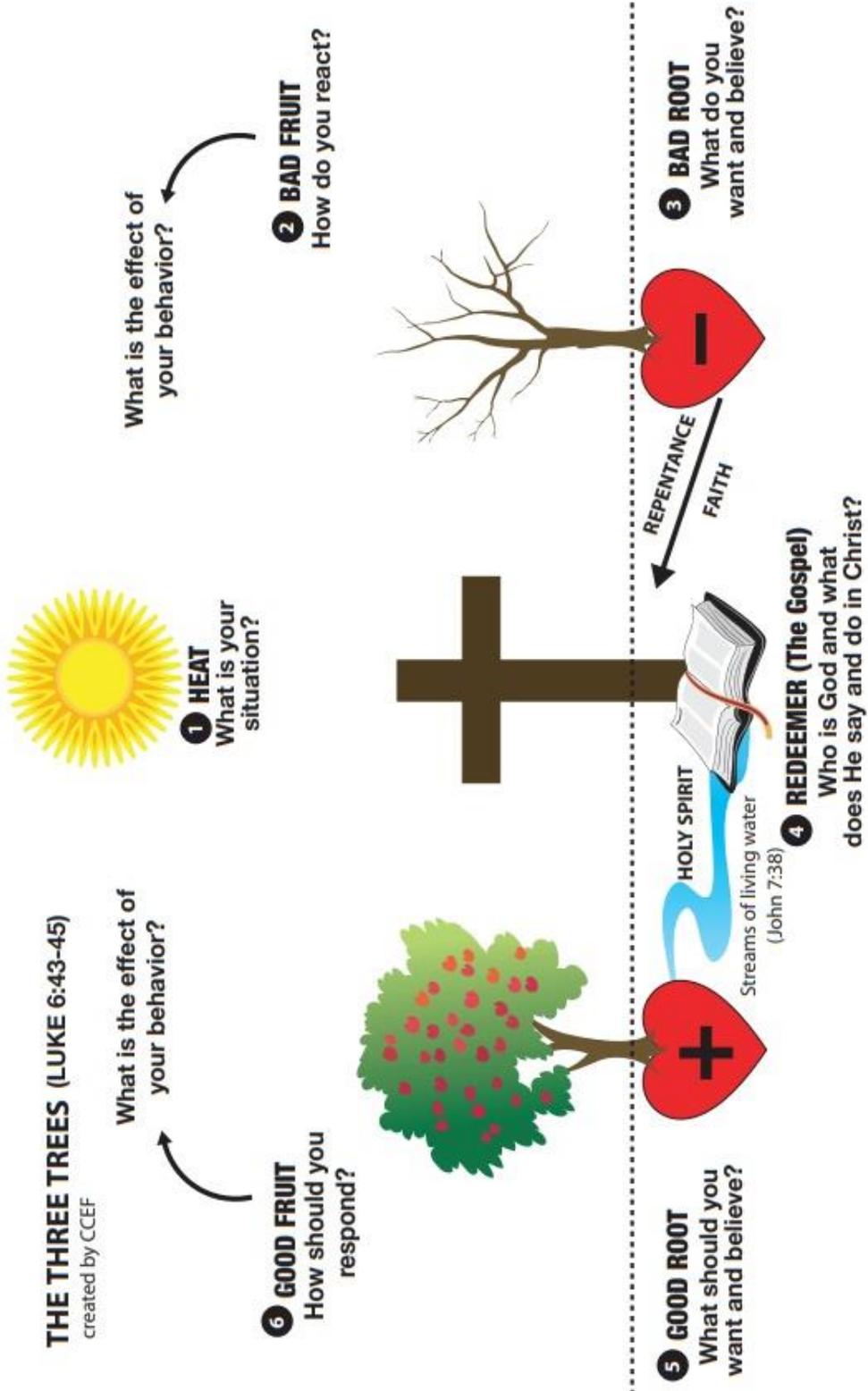
Bearing and Comforting in Weakness Together

- 1 Corinthians 10:13
- 1 Peter 2:18-5:10; Galatians 6:7-8
- Romans 15:1-3; Galatians 6:1-4
- Mark 7:18-23

Forgiving and Repenting Together

- Proverbs 4:23
- Luke 6:39-45
- Ephesians 4:17-24
- James 4:1-2
- Philippians 4:2-3
- Colossians 3:12-14
- James 5:16
- Romans 13:14
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Appendix 3: Three Trees Diagram



Source: <https://www.graceky.org/biblical-counseling/counselor-toolbox/>

Appendix 4: Helpful Resources for Counseling toward Selflessness

Bridges, Jerry. *The Gospel for Real Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003.

Emler, Michael R. *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021.

Sande, Ken. *Peacemaking for Families*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2002.

———. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conduct*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004.

Scott, Stuart. *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective*. Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002.

Mack, Wayne. *Your Family God's Way*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002.

Thomas, Robert L. *Who Am I: The Christian Hunger for Self-Identity*. Ross-shire, GB: Christian Focus Publications, 2002.

Tripp, Paul David. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002.

Welch, Edward T. *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.