

HIGHER LOVE

Discovering God's Design for Your Marriage

LEADER'S GUIDE

FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
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*Essentials of Marriage: Higher Love
Leader's Guide*

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WELCOME!

Marriage can be tough—but learning about it doesn't have to be. In fact, we think you'll find this course easy to use, to the point—even fun.

At the heart of each session is a DVD presentation featuring some of today's top marriage experts.

Then there's the Participant's Guide—the book each of your group members will need to make the course personal.

Finally, there's the Leader's Guide—the book you're holding right now. It's designed to help you turn the DVD and Participant's Guide into a lively group experience in which spouses learn and support each other.

Preparing for the Session

Before each meeting, review the session plan in this book. Look at the corresponding chapter in the Participant's Guide. Preview the DVD segment if possible; then make sure it's cued up for your group to watch.

For most sessions, you'll need pencils or pens. For some, if your group is large, you may need chalkboard and chalk or other display surface and writing tool (newsprint and marker, white board and marker, etc.). You may also need to gather a few other easy-to-find materials, listed in “Setting the Stage” at the start of each session.

Leading the Session

You'll find the session plans easy to follow. Instructions to you are in regular type; things you might say to the group are in bold type; suggested answers are in parentheses.

Each session, designed to last about an hour, includes five steps:

1. Getting Together (5 minutes)

Using a game or other “icebreaker” activity, you'll grab the group's interest and build a sense of community. This step is optional; if your group members need help getting acquainted, or if they just like to have a good time, it can be especially valuable.

2. Finding Yourself (5-10 minutes)

Participants take a survey to help them see how this session topic might benefit them.

3. Catching the Vision (20-25 minutes)

Watch and discuss the DVD segment.

4. Digging Deeper (10 minutes)

If part of your group's mission is discussing God's Word, you'll want to include this Bible study step. If yours is more of a community outreach effort, you may wish to condense or delete this section.

5. Making It Work (10 minutes)

It's time for practical application, as group members use the corresponding section of the Participant's Guide to come up with action plans for their own marriages.

6. Bringing It Home (5 minutes)

For you, this is a brief wrap-up. For group members, it's something to read later: practical advice from a counselor.

Tips for Success

- If your group is like most, you often run out of time before you run out of discussion questions and activities. What to do? Simply choose the exercises and questions you think will be most helpful to your group and concentrate on those. Try starting with the bare essentials—watching the DVD and applying the principles through the “Making It Work” activity—and add steps as your schedule allows.
- Invite discussion, but don't be surprised if some group members are reluctant to share personal information. If people want to reflect silently on a probing question, encourage them to do so.
- Couples will benefit most, of course, if both spouses attend your sessions. In some cases, though, schedules or interest levels may require some spouses to attend alone. If that's true in your group, be sure to help these individuals feel welcomed and supported. You'll need to adapt some activities in this guide accordingly. Instead of having spouses discuss a question, for example,

you may want to form subgroups of three to five—or simply skip questions that would be too personal for individuals to discuss with anyone other than a mate.

- Don't allow laughter at anyone's expense. If some of the discussion questions seem likely to cause embarrassment, feel free to omit them; if they would be more appropriately answered between husband and wife in private, encourage group members to do so later.
- Instead of pressing group members to reveal information they're not comfortable sharing, tell an occasional story on yourself if you like. Propose the following guidelines to participants: Before raising a question or referring to an experience, make sure it won't embarrass your spouse; if in doubt, privately ask your spouse's permission beforehand; maintain confidentiality.
- Let participants know that if they're struggling in their marriages, help is available. Provide contact information for local Christian counselors, especially any who are connected with your church. If your church staff doesn't know of a therapist, Focus on the Family has a referral network of Christian counselors. For information, call 1-800-A-FAMILY and ask for the counseling department. You can also download free, printable brochures offering help for couples at <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/articles/brochures.aspx>.
- If possible, each group member—not just each couple—should have a Participant's Guide. Otherwise, spouses won't be able to write individual responses to opinion questions. It's a good idea to have a few extra copies of the Participant's Guide on hand, so that visitors (and those who forgot their books) can take part.
- If you don't have an answer to every question, join the club! It's okay to say, "I don't know." Ask group members to share wisdom from their experience. Refer people to books like *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House, 2006), which contains help for almost any stage of married life.
- Have a good time! Marriage may be serious business, but most of your group members probably would appreciate a light touch as they learn. Let your group be a place where spouses can laugh together and gain perspective on their marital challenges.
- Pray. Pray for your group members during the week. Urge them to pray for each other. Ask God to help each person become the loving, effective mate he or she was meant to be.

For additional tips on leading your group, see the “Instructions for Leaders” feature on the DVD. You can also find further advice for your couples at focusonthefamily.com/marriage.

Ready to have a lasting, positive impact on the marriages represented in your group? May God bless you as you lead!

Note: Many issues addressed in this series are difficult ones. Some couples may need to address them in greater detail and depth. The DVD presentations and this guide are intended as general advice only, and not to replace clinical counseling, medical treatment, legal counsel, or financial guidance.



Session 1

FINDING HOLINESS AND HAPPINESS

Why did God invent marriage? To make us happy? Not according to author Gary Thomas, whose ideas about wedded bliss in this DVD segment may turn your assumptions upside-down.

God is more interested in making us *holy*, Gary explains, and marriage is a great place to work on that. As if that's not enough, Gary urges husbands and wives to see God not only as their Father—but also their Father-in-law. That's because our spouses are God's children, and we're to treat them that way.

Host Dr. Greg Smalley adds a story from his own marriage, rounding out a thought-provoking look at why you got married—even if you didn't know it at the time.

Session Aim

To help spouses see their marriages as opportunities for spiritual growth, and to welcome trials that might otherwise frustrate them.

Setting the Stage

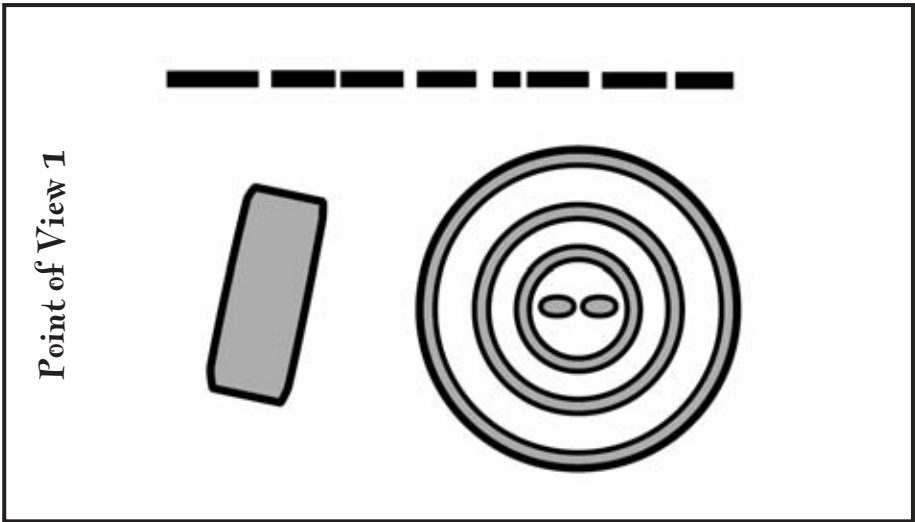
- Read this session plan and Chapter 1 in the Participant's Guide.
- Provide pencils or pens.
- If you want to use the “Point of View” icebreaker in Step 1, photocopy and cut out the drawings (one copy per couple).
- Cue up the DVD to segment 1, “Finding Holiness and Happiness.”

1. GETTING TOGETHER

Optional Icebreaker

(5 minutes)

If you'd like to start on a light note, try this activity. Before the session, photocopy the following "Point of View" pictures. Cut the "Point of View 1" and "Point of View 2" diagrams apart.



As people arrive, give each couple a copy of “Point of View 1.”

Let couples try to decide what’s depicted. When it’s time to begin your meeting, ask whether anyone’s figured out what the pictures represent. (They are, in order, the letters of the word *MARRIAGE*, a wedding ring, and a wedding cake—all viewed from above.)

In case people doubt your explanation of the drawings, pass out copies of “Point of View 2.” Then say something like this:

Why was it hard to tell what the first set of pictures represented? (Probably because people assumed they were looking at the objects from a “normal” perspective. We’re not used to seeing these items from a different vantage point.)

Things can look very different from another point of view. The same is true of your marriage. Each of you has a perspective on it—and God has His perspective, too. Today we’ll be talking about God’s view of your marriage—a very important one, since He came up with the idea of husbands and wives.

2. FINDING YOURSELF

Identifying Your Needs

(5-10 minutes)

Ask group members to turn to the “Finding Yourself” section in the Participant’s Guide. Invite them to fill out the survey; couples can work together or individually. Then let volunteers share a few of their answers with the group.

1. How might each of the following describe your wedding in 10 words or less? Why?

your maid of honor _____

your best man _____

your parents _____

your pastor _____

God _____

(Answers will vary; a best man might fondly remember tying the groom’s shoelaces together before he stumbled down the aisle, while parents could see it as the day their “empty nest” syndrome officially began. The important

thing is to see how perspectives differ, and to start thinking about what God's view of a particular marriage might be.)

- 2. How would you rank the following elements of marriage from most important to least? How do you think God would rank these factors? If the rankings are different, what do you think accounts for that?**

- ___ whether spouses agree on political issues
- ___ how often spouses pray together
- ___ whether spouses plan to have children
- ___ how involved spouses are in ministry
- ___ how much spouses enjoy each other's company
- ___ how much money spouses give to church work

(Rankings will differ. Participants may assume God cares mainly about the "spiritual" issues—praying together, ministry, and church giving. But there's no reason to assume He doesn't care about the rest, too.)

- 3. How do you think each of the following would define marriage?**

- your spouse** _____
- Jesus Christ** _____
- someone who's been married a dozen times** _____
- your kids, if you have any** _____
- your oldest living relative** _____

(Answers may vary widely. Pay special attention to people's ideas about what Jesus might say. If time allows, ask them to explain their replies.)

- 4. Did your wedding ceremony acknowledge God's involvement in your marriage? If so, how? If not, why not?** _____

(Those married in a church probably heard words about God, whether or not they took His involvement seriously. A traditional ceremony usually includes statements about being gathered in the presence of God, and not separating what God has joined.)

5. Since your wedding, have you acknowledged God's involvement in your marriage? If so, how? If not, why not? _____

(Some couples may have prayed together, though many might have a hard time coming up with specific examples of recognizing God's role.)

3. CATCHING THE VISION

Watching and Discussing the DVD

(20-25 minutes)

After viewing the DVD, use questions like these to help group members think through what they saw and heard.

1. If you stood on a street corner in your town and asked people, "Why did God invent marriage?" what would they answer? If you surveyed 100 of those people, how many do you think would give you replies like each of the following? Why?

- "For raising children."
- "So we wouldn't be lonely."
- "To torture us."
- "To make us better people."
- "Who said He invented marriage?"

(Opinions will differ. If time allows, ask participants which of the replies would come closest to their own.)

2. Gary Thomas believes God created marriage to make us holy, not just to make us happy. Which of the following best describes your reaction to that idea?

- "That figures, since God doesn't want anyone to be happy."
- "It doesn't seem to be working."
- "Being happy is a result of being holy."

- “That explains why I’m so miserable.”
- other _____

(Some participants probably will see the third choice as the “right” answer, but encourage people to be honest in their responses.)

3. How was Gary’s experience with the ice trays an example of a spiritual challenge in marriage? What do you think God wanted him to do in that situation? Why?

(It’s hard to go against the grain of your personality, habits, and upbringing. For Gary to adjust to his wife’s preference rather than insisting on his own would require the kind of unselfishness, love, and empathy that God calls us to—and develops in us as we become more like His Son.)

4. Who’s one of the holiest people you’ve ever met? Was he or she also one of the happiest? Does that make you interested in holiness? Why or why not?

(If participants think of “holy” people as overly serious or sour, they probably aren’t interested in holiness. Since true holiness refers to being set apart for God’s use, a “holy” person could have a bubbly personality or a somber one; neither of those is a guarantee of happiness. The bottom line is that many of us don’t really understand holiness *or* happiness.)

5. What do you think you could learn about loving, giving, forgiving, confronting, or asking forgiveness in each of the following situations?

- **Your spouse blames you when the restaurant you chose for dinner has a long waiting list.**
- **You borrow your spouse’s cell phone and discover that he or she’s been getting calls from an old flame.**
- **Your spouse can’t seem to give up smoking, and you have asthma.**

(Being unjustly blamed could give you a chance to express love by forgiving your spouse; feeling betrayed could teach you how to confront in a loving way, and to give your mate the benefit of the doubt instead of jumping to conclusions; living with a mate who endangers your health could show you the value of confronting and giving the support needed to help the person stop smoking.)

- 6. Gary says that many people expect their spouses to give them fulfillment, joy, and unconditional love—which only God can provide reliably. If you gave up those expectations tomorrow morning, how might the rest of your week be different?**

(It might free you to love your spouse without insisting on anything in return; it could motivate you to build a closer relationship with God.)

- 7. If you really believe your spouse is God’s child, and that He’s protective of him or her, how will it affect what you do in the following situations?**
- **You wish your spouse would lose 20 pounds.**
 - **Your spouse forgets to pay the car insurance bill, then gets in a fender bender after coverage lapses.**
 - **Your spouse is accused of shoplifting.**

(Answers will vary. But you’d probably be more gentle with your spouse. You’d be slower to accuse or blame. You’d be more likely to trust God to bring about any needed changes in your mate instead of trying to make them yourself or berating your spouse for changing too slowly.)

- 8. According to Gary, we need to accept the following three spiritual realities about marriage. Which of them is hardest for you to understand? To accept? To remember during everyday disappointments and conflicts?**
- **Marriage is a very difficult relationship.**
 - **You stay married even though your spouse isn’t perfect.**
 - **God is your spiritual Father-in-law, and you love your spouse out of reverence for Him.**

(Replies will differ. Some group members may not have thought much about these concepts; be patient if they aren’t ready to answer yet.)

- 9. Why does Gary sometimes “pray” song lyrics about loving his wife when he wakes up? How would you put that message in the form of a prayer about your spouse? How often would you be willing to pray it?**

(Gary’s prayer may remind him that he’s the only husband his wife has, which gives him a unique responsibility to show love to her. Group

members' versions of the prayer will vary, as will their interest in praying it. If time allows, ask participants what effect they think the prayer might have.)

4. DIGGING DEEPER

Bible Study

(10 minutes)

If your group has been organized with Bible study in mind, have volunteers read these passages and discuss the questions that follow them.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." . . .

So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."*

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:18, 20-25)

1. Do you think God expected to find a "suitable helper" for Adam in the animal kingdom? Why or why not?

(No; He declared His intention to make one before the "search" was conducted. Perhaps the search was for Adam's benefit, since God already knew the kind of companion Adam needed.)

2. Why do you suppose God took Eve out of Adam, only to decree that they reunite? What does this tell you about God's purposes for marriage?

(Answers will vary. Many have suggested that the symbolism of “two from one” and “two becoming one” echoes God's three-in-one nature. It might also echo the oneness and care for each other's bodies [Ephesians 5:28] that He wants married couples to have.)

3. Is it hard to imagine feeling “no shame” about being naked? Why or why not? Do you think that's still true of most husbands and wives? Why or why not?

(If feeling no shame were common after the Fall, the writer probably wouldn't have mentioned the issue. Part of a healthy marriage involves learning to enjoy each other's bodies, but spouses often continue to struggle with embarrassment or a lack of confidence about their appearance.)

4. If Genesis 2:18, 20-25 were the only thing you knew about men and women, how would you describe God's view of marriage?

(Some possibilities: God cares whether people are alone; the companionship and teamwork of marriage are designed to meet a human need; sexuality [man and woman becoming “one flesh”] is basic to that relationship.)

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." (Matthew 19:1-12)

5. Is it lawful today to divorce "for any and every reason"? What reasons do divorcing couples tend to give?

(In most of Western culture, legal grounds for divorce are broad enough that they can be made to apply in almost any situation. Reasons like "incompatibility" and "alienation of affection" are cited in court; divorced couples often say they "just drifted apart," "outgrew each other," "couldn't communicate," or that one partner was "emotionally unavailable." In other cases, of course, more specific reasons like infidelity or abuse are involved.)

6. Why did the disciples think Jesus' view of marriage made singleness look good? Do you think most people would agree? Why or why not?

(The disciples appeared to want more options than Jesus was giving them. Many people today would, too, though they might prefer "serial monogamy" to singleness.)

7. If Matthew 19:1-12 were the only thing you knew about men and women, how would you describe God's view of marriage?

(Some possibilities: Marriage is meant to last for life; God joins spouses together; marriage is desirable, but not for everyone.)

8. If you believe that God Himself has joined you and your spouse together, how might this affect your reactions to the following situations?

- **You disagree strongly over whether to buy a house.**
- **You're tired of spending holidays with your in-laws.**
- **Your spouse is diagnosed with Alzheimer's.**
- **The two of you are asked to start a small group for your church.**
- **Your spouse warns that the two of you are "drifting apart."**

(Believing this might make you more willing to give up your “rights” in order to stay together. If both of you believe it, you might also be more willing to jump into conflict resolution without fear that your spouse will leave if he or she doesn’t get his or her way. You could be more likely to stay with your declining spouse or start a small group because you believe it’s part of God’s purpose in bringing you together. You probably would do all you could to avoid drifting apart.)

5. MAKING IT WORK

Applying the Principles

(10 minutes)

Have the group turn to the “Making It Work” section in the Participant’s Guide. Allow at least five minutes for couples to work through the “Happiness and Holiness Meals” exercise. Then let them share the results with fellow participants.

To help couples apply what they learned, try questions like the following.

Which foods did you connect with holiness? Which ones with happiness?

Why?

(There are no “right” answers here. The goal is to help group members think about their preconceptions.)

Did anyone come up with a meal that’s both “holy” and “happy”?

(If anyone did, ask for “nutrition information” on the percentages of holiness and happiness. As needed, emphasize that we can have a heart of both happiness and holiness.)

If a person believes holiness is all about deprivation and suffering and unpleasantness, how will he or she react to the idea that God wants us to be holy, not just happy?

(Probably by ignoring God’s view.)

If you think happiness is all about comfort and pleasure and getting your own way, how will you respond to Gary Thomas’ call in this session?

(Probably by ignoring it.)

6. BRINGING IT HOME

Reinforcing Your Point

(5 minutes)

Ask people to read the “Bringing It Home” section of their Participant’s Guides later this week. They’ll find insights from a counselor on how faith can keep a couple together.

You may want to conclude your meeting with comments like the following.

In our next two sessions we’ll be talking more about God’s view of our marriages. You’ll hear a lot about His purposes for us—which often seem to be at odds with our own.

It will be tempting to nod your head and say, “Yes, I’m all for holiness. Who needs that happiness stuff?” Saying that would sound very spiritual, but might not be very honest. So I encourage you to think this week about those Holiness Meals and Happiness Meals. You may want to ask God to give you an appetite for both.

Close in prayer, making that request on your own behalf—and asking the Lord to give you all a clearer picture of His perspective on your marriages.