



THE MARRIAGE TABLE · JESUS & MARRIAGE

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Help couples follow Jesus, not perform for a group.

Preparation, session-by-session teaching guidance, safe conversation practices, and a simple plan for leading a group of couples. No counseling qualification is implied.

Abide. Become. Be Sent.

A free discipleship resource from MSSNL.

For spouses and groups of couples · mssnl.org/table/marriage

Your role at the table.

Prepare carefully. Listen well. Point to Jesus.

Read each chapter before leading. You are a fellow disciple, not the judge of a couple's marriage. Ask open questions, make room for silence, and keep discussion connected to Scripture rather than advice-giving.

Each person owns their reflections. Online notes belong only to the signed-in account; a spouse or group cannot automatically see them. If you freely choose to use one device together, either person may keep separate notes instead. Store printed notes securely. Never collect or circulate a couple's private worksheets.

Safety comes first

This is a discipleship resource, not licensed counseling, and it makes no promise to repair any marriage. Never use it to pressure a spouse toward reconciliation, disclosure, sex, submission, or any kind of control. If there is physical, sexual, emotional, financial, or spiritual abuse, or you fear for your safety or your children's, do not work through these sessions together. Do not confront your spouse with what you write here. Contact a confidential professional, a trusted pastor, a domestic violence hotline, or local emergency services. Skip any question that is unsafe to answer. Anyone may pass on anything, at any time.

A repeatable group plan.

Before the first meeting

Invite couples, share the book and workbook, agree on place and pace, and discuss confidentiality and its legal/safety limits. Do not promise absolute secrecy. No one must describe conflict, sex, finances, trauma, or another person's behavior.

About 75–90 minutes

1. Welcome and voluntary follow-up · 10 minutes.
2. Read Scripture and review the chapter's teaching · 15 minutes.
3. Quiet personal reflection, then private couple conversation · 20–25 minutes.
4. Optional group discussion of general insights · 20–25 minutes.
5. Choose a personal action; pray without disclosing private details · 10–15 minutes.

When a conversation is unsafe

Stop pressure and public confrontation. Do not investigate abuse in the group or require a joint meeting with an alleged abuser. Offer a safe, confidential route to qualified help and follow applicable safeguarding/reporting duties. Never make continued group attendance a condition of support.

Choose a way to meet.

As spouses

- Meet where you both feel safe and unhurried, about 45 to 60 minutes. Put phones away.
- Each reads the chapter and the session page alone first. Reflect separately before you speak together.
- Take turns. One speaks on a question while the other only listens, then they switch. No interrupting, no rebuttal, no correcting the other's memory.
- Either of you may say pass. A pass is never explained and never punished.
- Choose together, or separately, one small next step. It is optional; an agreed step is a gift, not a demand.
- Close in prayer, aloud or silently. Never use prayer to make a point to your spouse.

As a group of couples

- Three to six couples meet every one or two weeks for 75 to 90 minutes. Couples are never asked to share what they discussed privately.
- Open with welcome and the confidentiality agreement: what is said stays here unless someone is at risk of harm. Remind everyone they may pass.
- Each person reflects alone for five minutes, then each couple talks quietly as a pair using the couple prompts.
- Return together for the group prompt. Share only what you freely choose, and never share your spouse's story, failures, or private matters.
- Facilitators never ask a couple to report on one another, and never press for confession, reconciliation, or detail. Redirect any complaint about a spouse.
- Close with one optional next step per couple and a prayer. If anyone shows signs of fear or harm, follow up privately and point to confidential professional help.

Share with others only with clear, freely given consent from both spouses. Nothing in this tool is shared automatically with a spouse, a facilitator, or a group.

Your session guide.

Go at a pace that leaves room to practice. Read the book alongside this workbook. The following page numbers lead to each session's teaching.

1. Introduction: A Sacred Covenant Built on Compassion • **page 6**
2. Chapter 1: Marriage Begins With Covenant • **page 8**
3. Chapter 2: Love and Respect • **page 10**
4. Chapter 3: The Love That Lays Itself Down • **page 12**
5. Chapter 4: Learning to Hear One Another • **page 14**
6. Chapter 5: Boundaries • **page 16**
7. Chapter 6: Accountability • **page 18**
8. Chapter 7: Discipline • **page 20**
9. Chapter 8: Shame and Offense • **page 22**
10. Chapter 9: Fear and Anger • **page 24**
11. Chapter 10: Support and Trust • **page 26**
12. Chapter 11: Encourage and Pray • **page 28**
13. Chapter 12: Compassion and Vision • **page 30**
14. Conclusion: A Marriage That Reflects Christ • **page 32**

Free book, audiobook, and EPUB: mssnl.org/jesus-and-marriage

Introduction: A Sacred Covenant Built on Compassion

Preparation: Read the Introduction, A Sacred Covenant Built on Compassion.

Keep this teaching central

Two people bring histories, personalities, expectations, and wounds into one home. The introduction begins at creation: husband and wife are both made in God's image and both answer to him. Marriage joins them without erasing the personal responsibility each carries before the Lord. Genesis 3 shows how sin brought hiding, blame, and fear into the first home, and the book names what that looks like now: pride, selfishness, fear, and the urge to control. Neither spouse can be the other's savior; both need Jesus, who gives forgiveness and new life. The book offers three practical frameworks, BAD (Boundaries, Accountability, Discipline), SOFA (Shame, Offense, Fear, Anger) and STEP (Support, Trust, Encourage, Pray), and is clear that none of them measures the worth of a marriage. It also states plainly that covenant faithfulness is never an excuse for violence, coercion, manipulation, or abuse, and that a harmed spouse may need protection and professional help. Begin with your own heart before your spouse's.

Read Scripture in context

Genesis 1:27 says God made both male and female in his image, so neither spouse gives the other their worth. Genesis 2:24 describes a man leaving his parents and holding fast to his wife so they become one flesh. Matthew 19:6 has Jesus saying that what God has joined together, no one should separate. John 15:5 has Jesus teaching that a branch bears fruit only by remaining in him.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: read the safety statement aloud at the very first meeting and agree on confidentiality and the right to pass. Explain the three frameworks as helps, not scorecards. Name that couples attend with different histories, and that no one will be asked to disclose anything. Notice quietly whether anyone seems afraid of their spouse and offer a private word afterward if so.

Opening

Share a first name and one thing you hope to learn. Agree on confidentiality and the right to pass.

Private couple conversation

Quietly, as a couple: what would make this a safe place for each of us?

Optional group sharing

One word for what you are bringing into this room. No explanation required.

Facilitator caution

Do not ask couples how they met or what drew them into difficulty. Keep it light.

Practice and pray

Read the Introduction, then write down one thing you are thankful for in your spouse and one area where you want to look at your own heart. Pray about it alone before any conversation together.

Lord Jesus, you are the center of every home. Show us what you have already given, give us honest hearts, and help us follow you together. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 1: Marriage Begins With Covenant

Preparation: Read Chapter 1, Marriage Begins With Covenant.

Keep this teaching central

A wedding lasts a few hours; a covenant is meant to shape the years after it. Jesus answered a question about divorce by returning to the beginning, which shows that marriage rests on God's design and not only on human preference. The chapter notes the surrounding conversation about hardness of heart, so Jesus's words must not be flattened into a rule that every troubled marriage looks the same. Malachi confronts men who worshiped while treating their wives treacherously, which means faith and private conduct cannot be separated. Marriage includes affection and friendship but does not depend on feelings staying easy. The chapter also keeps covenant faithfulness from being used as a weapon: the covenant calls for truth, repentance, protection from harm, and careful discernment, not for hiding what is really happening. Faithfulness is lived out in daily choices, not only in the vows.

Read Scripture in context

Matthew 19:3-6 records the Pharisees asking Jesus about divorce, and Jesus answering by pointing back to creation and the one flesh union God joins. Malachi 2:14 calls a wife the husband's companion and wife by covenant, with God as witness to the vows. Genesis 2:24 gives the pattern: leave, hold fast, become one.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: this chapter touches divorce, and some in the room may be divorced, remarried, or in a painful season. Do not debate doctrine of divorce in the group. Hold the chapter's point that covenant never excuses abuse. If someone asks whether they must stay in a dangerous marriage, do not answer from the group; direct them to a pastor and a confidential professional.

Opening

Invite each person to name one thing they remember about their wedding day, if they wish.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: which promise matters most to each of us right now? Take turns, no responding.

Optional group sharing

What does covenant mean to you? Speak for yourself, not for your spouse.

Facilitator caution

Do not discuss divorce cases in the group. Honor those in a different marital situation.

Practice and pray

Together or separately, reread your vows if you have them, or write down in one sentence what you meant to promise. Choose one small act that honors that promise this week.

Father, you witnessed our vows. Teach us to take them seriously and gently. Where we have been careless, forgive us, and give us grace for faithful days. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 2: Love and Respect

Preparation: Read Chapter 2, Love and Respect.

Keep this teaching central

Love and respect are shown in different ways, and many arguments begin in ordinary things: a late night at work, a purchase not discussed, a forgotten task. The chapter shows how a husband may hear criticism as proof that nothing he does is enough, while a wife may hear a broken plan as proof she cannot depend on him. Underneath, each may be asking whether they are valued. The chapter grounds identity in the Father's love, so neither spouse has to demand worth from the other. It notes that Christian traditions differ in how they understand headship and submission in Ephesians 5, and asks readers to study carefully and charitably. Whatever view is held, the chapter does not support control, coercion, or silence that costs someone safety. Both spouses are called to speak truthfully, put away contempt, and serve. The chapter closes by inviting gratitude for the love and respect already present.

Read Scripture in context

Ephesians 5 speaks of love and respect near the end of Paul's teaching on life in Christ. Ephesians 4 calls believers to put away corrupting talk and speak what builds up. 1 John 3:1 celebrates the Father's love that makes believers his children, which grounds identity in a gift rather than in a spouse's approval.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: this is the chapter most likely to be misused. Never let the group assign submission to one spouse as a way of silencing them, and never use headship language to pressure someone. If a spouse describes being controlled, frightened, or punished for disagreeing, stop the discussion kindly and speak privately afterward. Keep the focus on each person's own heart and words, not on what a spouse should do.

Opening

Name one moment you felt loved recently, without naming who gave it.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: take turns completing, I feel respected when... and I feel loved when...

Optional group sharing

What have you learned about the way you show love? Share only your own side.

Facilitator caution

Do not let anyone assign roles or submission to a spouse. Stop and redirect if control language appears.

Practice and pray

Choose one way your spouse seems to receive love or respect and offer it once this week without asking for anything back. Also remove one corrosive phrase from your speech.

God our Father, you have called us your children. Settle our identity in you, so we can love and respect without demanding. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 3: The Love That Lays Itself Down

Preparation: Read Chapter 3, The Love That Lays Itself Down.

Keep this teaching central

Love begins as a promise and is learned through shared responsibility: illness, financial uncertainty, disappointment, and changed plans. We can sincerely love someone while remaining deeply attached to our own comfort. The chapter shows a husband reluctant to give up his evening and a wife stretched thin by one more demand. Jesus gave a deeper pattern in his final teaching before his arrest: love willing to bear cost. The book is careful that this is not a love that disappears into someone else's demands. Laying yourself down does not mean accepting abuse, excusing sin, or having no needs. It means willingly serving someone's good under Christ. The chapter asks couples to apologize, reconsider decisions, share burdens, and return to conversations that remain unresolved, all with humility and hope.

Read Scripture in context

John 15 records Jesus teaching his disciples to abide in his love and keep his commandments, and to love one another as he loved them. 1 John 3 points to Jesus laying down his life and calls believers to love in deed and truth. Ephesians 5 connects a husband's love with the sacrificial love of Christ.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: guard the line between sacrificial love and self-erasure. If someone describes always giving while being harmed or controlled, name gently that laying yourself down is not the same as enduring mistreatment, and offer a private conversation or a referral. Do not let the group measure whose sacrifice is bigger.

Opening

Share what is hardest about serving your spouse in this season, speaking only of yourself.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: offer one small act of service for each other this week. Ask what would help before assuming.

Optional group sharing

How has sacrificial love looked different from what you expected?

Facilitator caution

Do not compare sacrifices. Name that serving is not the same as tolerating harm.

Practice and pray

Ask one question in turn: What would make this week lighter for you? Listen, and then do one small thing from the answer. Do it without announcing it.

Jesus, you laid down your life for us. Teach us a love that serves truthfully and is not driven by fear. Make us willing, and keep us wise. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 4: Learning to Hear One Another

Preparation: Read Chapter 4, Learning to Hear One Another.

Keep this teaching central

A couple will share thousands of conversations, and the way they handle them shapes how well they understand one another. Sharing a home does not mean knowing what the other person is carrying. A spouse can assume motives, reach conclusions before hearing the facts, or prepare a reply while the other is still speaking. The chapter draws on Proverbs: wisdom connects careful speech with humility and patience. A gentle answer is wisdom about how words affect a conversation, not a guarantee of outcome. Paul gives the deeper reason: believers have a new life and speak accordingly. The chapter encourages listening to understand, asking questions, restating what you heard, choosing a good time, and confessing when a conversation turns sharp. It also notes that some topics need a pause and that no one should be cornered in a conversation.

Read Scripture in context

Proverbs 15:1 teaches that a gentle answer turns away wrath, while a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs more widely warns against answering before you have listened. Ephesians 4 describes putting away old patterns of speech and speaking in ways that give grace. James 1 urges believers to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: model the listening exercise before asking couples to try it. Time each turn so no one dominates. If a couple's practice begins to escalate, stop it kindly and move on. Do not use the exercise to force a discussion of a hot topic; pick a small one. Anyone may sit it out.

Opening

Briefly share a moment when you felt truly heard, by anyone.

Private couple conversation

Use the listening exercise in the session: three minutes each, restate, check, switch. Stop if it becomes tense.

Optional group sharing

What did you notice about your own listening? Share your own habits only.

Facilitator caution

Do not use the exercise on a heated issue. Anyone may sit it out.

Practice and pray

Practice one listening exchange in turns. One speaks for three minutes about a small, non-explosive topic while the other listens without interrupting, then says back what they heard and asks, did I get that right? Switch.

Lord, make us quick to listen and slow to speak. Guard our words, soften our tone, and help us hear what is really being said. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 5: Boundaries

Preparation: Read Chapter 5, Boundaries, the first part of the BAD framework.

Keep this teaching central

Every marriage needs love and protection. Boundaries are wise limits around what matters, placed early, before habits and relationships quietly weaken the covenant. The chapter links boundaries to the heart: Jesus taught that faithfulness reaches beyond what others can see, and Proverbs speaks of guarding the heart because the springs of life flow from it. Paul warns people who think they stand to take heed. Boundaries may involve time, technology, friendships, money, work, and family. They must not be turned into control. A boundary is a limit you set on your own conduct; it is not a rule imposed on a spouse to restrict them, monitor them, or isolate them. The chapter also affirms that someone harmed by their spouse may need a boundary of protection, including separation, and that such a boundary is not unfaithfulness.

Read Scripture in context

Matthew 5 records Jesus's teaching on adultery, showing that obedience reaches into the heart and not only outward acts. Proverbs 4 and 6 speak about guarding the heart and the destructive consequences of sexual unfaithfulness. 1 Corinthians 10 warns against overconfidence and encourages taking care not to fall.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: draw a firm line between boundaries on oneself and surveillance or control of a spouse. Do not ask anyone to share about temptation, pornography, affairs, or sexual matters in a mixed group; invite those who need to speak to do so with a pastor or professional. Never suggest that a spouse hand over passwords or phones. If someone describes monitoring or isolation, treat it as a safety concern.

Opening

Name one area in which you are naturally careful, and one in which you could use a limit.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: each shares one boundary on your own conduct. No debating or adjusting each other's boundaries.

Optional group sharing

What boundaries have helped you, in general terms?

Facilitator caution

No questions about temptation, affairs, or sexual matters in a mixed group. Never encourage monitoring or password-sharing.

Practice and pray

Each of you writes one boundary on your own conduct, not your spouse's. Share only if you wish, and invite your spouse to respond with an honest question rather than a demand.

Lord, guard our hearts and our home. Show us the limits we need, keep us from controlling one another, and protect anyone who is in danger. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 6: Accountability

Preparation: Read Chapter 6, Accountability, the second part of the BAD framework.

Keep this teaching central

We resist correction, and marriage tests that resistance. The chapter asks who actually knows you well enough to speak truthfully, and whether you invite such people or avoid them. Proverbs describes teachability as part of wisdom; the point is not insult but a willingness to hear what is true. Galatians 6 requires gentleness and self-watch from anyone who corrects. Accountability does not mean a spouse becomes the other's monitor or judge, and it does not mean confession on demand. It is offered by mature friends and church community, freely received, with the aim of restoration. The chapter also states that some matters, including abuse, addiction, trauma, or danger, need qualified professional care and not only friendly accountability.

Read Scripture in context

James 5 comes near the end of James's letter and calls believers to confess sins to one another and pray for each other. Proverbs 12:1 sets love of discipline against hatred of reproof, treating teachability as part of wisdom. Galatians 6:1 calls spiritually mature believers to restore someone caught in transgression gently, while watching themselves.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: do not turn the group into a confessional. Warn explicitly against sharing spouse's failings or demanding disclosure from a spouse. Accountability should be offered with consent. If one person is pressing for access to their spouse's private life, name it as pressure and redirect to each person's own responsibility.

Opening

Who in your life has told you a hard truth well? What made it good?

Private couple conversation

As a couple: what is one way I can support your growth without policing you?

Optional group sharing

What helps you receive correction? Speak only about yourself.

Facilitator caution

Do not turn the group into a confession time. Never press anyone to disclose to a spouse.

Practice and pray

Choose one trusted person, not your spouse, with whom you will have an honest conversation about your own life this month. Tell your spouse only what you freely choose to tell.

Father, make us teachable. Give us friends who tell us the truth with gentleness, and make us gentle when we must speak. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 7: Discipline

Preparation: Read Chapter 7, Discipline, the third part of the BAD framework.

Keep this teaching central

Every marriage develops habits, some intentional and some by default through busy schedules. Discipline here means repeated practices that strengthen faithfulness, such as prayer, Scripture, rest, follow-through, and margin. Jesus himself withdrew to pray even when demands were high. Human limits are not moral failures; God made us with a need for rest. The chapter is careful not to make discipline a way of earning God's favor: believers cannot form themselves apart from the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit is a gift that grows as they respond. Start small. A simple conversation, a realistic prayer rhythm, a promise kept, or more margin can be an appropriate beginning. Discipline is also never an instrument for controlling a spouse's schedule or spiritual life.

Read Scripture in context

Luke 5 describes a season when crowds gathered to hear Jesus, and yet he withdrew to lonely places to pray. Galatians 5 lists the fruit of the Spirit, including love, patience, gentleness, and self-control. Scripture treats rest as part of life under God, as the biblical teaching about Sabbath shows. Philippians 2 reminds believers that God works in them as they respond.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: keep discipline small and realistic, and warn against competing over spiritual habits. Do not allow one spouse to prescribe the other's devotional life. Encourage couples to start with one thing they can actually finish.

Opening

Share one small habit that has helped your faith, in a sentence.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: each chooses one small practice. Discuss how to support it without pressure.

Optional group sharing

What gets in the way of rhythms of prayer and rest in your home?

Facilitator caution

Avoid competition over devotional habits. No one prescribes a spouse's spiritual life.

Practice and pray

Pick one small practice, such as five minutes of prayer, one meal without screens, or a weekly check-in, and decide a realistic day to start. Each person may choose their own.

Lord Jesus, you rested and prayed. Teach us rhythms that make room for you and for each other, and grow your fruit in us. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 8: Shame and Offense

Preparation: Read Chapter 8, Shame and Offense, the first part of the SOFA framework.

Keep this teaching central

Difficult emotions come to every marriage: regret, misunderstanding, disappointment. SOFA gives language for four of them, and this chapter takes shame and offense. Shame hides, and sends people into silence and concealment, as Adam and Eve hid and blamed. Romans 8 meets shame with the truth that those in Christ are not condemned. Offense, held, grows into resentment, and Paul tells Christians to put away bitterness and forgive as they were forgiven. The chapter distinguishes forgiving from pretending: forgiveness does not require reconciliation when harm continues, does not erase consequences, and does not mean you trust before trust is earned. Telling the truth about what happened matters. Where wounds are deep or involve abuse, trauma, or ongoing harm, the right step is qualified care and safety, not a quick forgiveness conversation with the person causing harm.

Read Scripture in context

Romans 8 opens by describing what God has done for those who belong to Christ: there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 4 warns against bitterness, wrath, and malice, and calls believers to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving as God in Christ forgave them. Genesis 3 shows hiding and blame as the first responses to shame.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: this is a vulnerable session. Do not ask anyone to disclose; invite private reflection only. Never press a spouse to forgive or to reconcile, and never imply forgiveness means staying near someone who is causing harm. Have names of pastoral, counseling, and crisis resources ready, and offer them without being asked. Expect tears and allow silence.

Opening

Take a quiet minute of silence together before beginning.

Private couple conversation

Individually, reflect and write. Talk as a couple only about what each chooses to share, and not at all if it is unsafe.

Optional group sharing

Offer only general reflections about shame or offense, never specifics about a spouse.

Facilitator caution

No disclosure is required. Do not press for forgiveness or reconciliation. Have crisis and counseling resources ready.

Practice and pray

Alone, write down one thing you have been hiding or one offense you have been carrying, and bring it to God in prayer. Decide whether and when a conversation or professional help is the right next step. Do not force a disclosure on yourself or your spouse.

Father, there is no condemnation for those in Jesus. Bring into the light what we hide, soften what has hardened, and heal what has been wounded. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 9: Fear and Anger

Preparation: Read Chapter 9, Fear and Anger, the second part of the SOFA framework.

Keep this teaching central

A husband and wife are known more closely than almost anyone else, which means fear and anger have somewhere to land. Fear may lead to control or withdrawal; anger may lead to harmful speech or action. The chapter observes that Jesus was angry at times but his anger was never self-serving or harmful. James notes that human anger does not produce God's righteousness. Self-control grows by the Spirit, and so the first step is to notice what is happening in your body and heart and bring it to God. The chapter is clear that anger and fear are not excuses for harm, and that anyone who frightens, intimidates, or harms their spouse needs to take responsibility and seek qualified help. Likewise, a spouse who is afraid of their partner is not obligated to stay and discuss it; safety is the priority.

Read Scripture in context

Mark 3 records Jesus meeting a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, with anger directed at hard hearts and grief at their stubbornness, showing that anger may be righteous but is never the same as a loss of control. James 1 calls believers to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Galatians 5 describes the fruit of the Spirit, including gentleness and self-control.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: this session raises the highest risk of someone disclosing fear of a spouse. Ask the group not to discuss anger or fear couple-to-couple in front of others. Keep to general reflection. Learn local domestic violence hotline and emergency numbers beforehand and share them. If someone seems afraid, speak with them alone, not in front of their spouse, and never share what they say with their spouse.

Opening

Begin with a short silence and a brief prayer for calm.

Private couple conversation

Individually, reflect on the pause practice. Share with your spouse only if it feels safe, and plan to continue later at home if needed.

Optional group sharing

Offer general reflections on managing anger or fear, without examples from your marriage.

Facilitator caution

Highest-risk session. Do not allow couple-to-couple discussion of anger or fear. Give hotline and emergency numbers. If anyone seems afraid, follow up with them alone.

Practice and pray

Agree, each for yourself, on one pause practice: step out for ten minutes, breathe, pray, and return to say what you need. Tell your spouse only if it is safe and you want to. If you are unsafe, do not announce it; use a safety plan from a hotline or professional.

Lord, you know our fears and our anger. Settle us, make us gentle, and show us where we need help. Protect anyone who is afraid. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 10: Support and Trust

Preparation: Read Chapter 10, Support and Trust, the first part of the STEP framework.

Keep this teaching central

A husband and wife can both see that something needs attention and wait for the other to begin. Support is carrying burdens together with care: sharing tasks, noticing exhaustion, and saying I'll take this. Galatians keeps personal responsibility in view: bearing burdens does not mean doing someone's growing for them. Trust grows through honesty and consistent faithfulness, not through demands. John adds that love is shown in action. Proverbs ties integrity to security, because a life of words and conduct that match is safe to live beside. The chapter notes trust broken by betrayal or harm is rebuilt slowly, by changed conduct over time and often with qualified help, and cannot be commanded. No one should be told to trust someone who continues to cause harm.

Read Scripture in context

Galatians 6 tells believers to bear one another's burdens, and also to carry their own load, so support does not replace responsibility. 1 John 3 points to Jesus laying down his life and calls believers to love in deed and truth. Proverbs connects integrity with security because a person's life matches their words.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: do not ask couples to rebuild trust in the session or to share betrayals. Emphasize that trust cannot be demanded and that rebuilding after serious harm needs professional help. Be especially attentive to couples who may be in an unequal power situation and avoid joint exercises that expose one to pressure.

Opening

Share one way someone has supported you in a hard season.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: each names one burden and one way to offer help. Do not resolve disagreements here.

Optional group sharing

What has helped trust grow in your life? Speak only about yourself.

Facilitator caution

Do not rebuild broken trust in the room. Remind the group that trust cannot be demanded.

Practice and pray

Each person names one burden they would like help with and one way they can offer support. Choose one and do it this week. Keep one promise you have been neglecting.

God, help us carry each other's burdens and our own. Make us people who keep our word, and heal what trust has been damaged. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 11: Encourage and Pray

Preparation: Read Chapter 11, Encourage and Pray, the second part of the STEP framework.

Keep this teaching central

A couple can fill their days with responsibility and slowly stop noticing the good. The person closest to them can become the one whose faithful efforts they notice least. Encouragement gives voice to what is good: patience, courage, hard work, humility. Paul's instructions in 1 Thessalonians reach particular needs: the idle, the fainthearted, the weak. Encouragement therefore is specific, not flattery and not a replacement for truth. Prayer brings concerns, wisdom, forgiveness, and thanks before the Lord. Romans 8 comforts believers who do not know what to pray, because the Spirit intercedes. Praying together should never be used to lecture, make a point, or press a spouse. Where it is not safe or comfortable to pray together, pray privately.

Read Scripture in context

1 Thessalonians 5 calls the church to encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with all, and to rejoice, pray without ceasing, and give thanks. Philippians 4:6 tells believers to bring requests to God with thanksgiving, and promises the peace of God guarding their hearts. Romans 8 comforts believers in weakness, because the Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: invite specific, concrete encouragement rather than generalities. Never require couples to pray aloud together or in front of the group. Ensure each person has the option to pray silently. Do not allow prayer requests to carry details about a spouse's struggles.

Opening

Name something you appreciate about a person in the room, other than your spouse.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: give one specific, true encouragement to each other. Silent prayer afterward is welcome.

Optional group sharing

Share a prayer request about yourself, with no detail about a spouse.

Facilitator caution

Do not require praying aloud. No requests that expose a spouse's struggles.

Practice and pray

Give your spouse one specific, truthful word of encouragement in person or in writing. Then pray, aloud or silently, for one thing each of you named, without commentary.

Lord, open our eyes to the good you are doing, and open our mouths to say so. Hear our requests, and give us your peace. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Chapter 12: Compassion and Vision

Preparation: Read Chapter 12, Compassion and Vision.

Keep this teaching central

Marriage is lived in the present and shaped by the future a couple is building. Many couples begin with meaningful hopes about the home they want, the people they will serve, and the way they will honor God. Some hopes are fulfilled; others change or remain uncertain. Jesus saw people with compassion, and that compassion invites spouses to see one another as people who carry burdens the other may not fully understand. James warns against presuming on the future, and calls for plans held under the Lord. The chapter holds together two things: facing present difficulties without pretending, and continuing to build wisely for the future. Vision here is not a five-year plan to impose on a spouse, but a shared willingness to live faithfully under Jesus in whatever season comes.

Read Scripture in context

Matthew 9 describes Jesus seeing the crowds and being moved with compassion because they were harassed and helpless. James 4 reminds people who plan their futures with confidence that they do not know what tomorrow will bring, and that all plans belong under the Lord's will. Romans 8 describes hope that waits for what is not yet seen.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: invite honest grief as well as hope. Do not push couples toward shared vision when they are in different places or when one is unsafe. If someone shares a decision they are pressuring a spouse about, gently turn the conversation to prayer and wise counsel. Make room for those whose hopes have not been met.

Opening

Share one hope you hold loosely for the coming year.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: complete, in this season I hope we will... Listen without correcting.

Optional group sharing

What is one way you would like to serve others? Share only your own part.

Facilitator caution

Honor grief and unmet hopes. Do not push shared vision when a couple is in a different place.

Practice and pray

Take turns completing the sentence: In this season, I hope we will... Listen without correcting. Then choose one small, shared or separate way to live that out in the next month.

Lord, give us compassion for each other and wisdom for what lies ahead. Hold our plans loosely and your will firmly. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Conclusion: A Marriage That Reflects Christ

Preparation: Read the Conclusion, A Marriage That Reflects Christ.

Keep this teaching central

A marriage is built over a lifetime. The wedding starts the covenant; the days that follow give it expression through ordinary responsibilities, hard conversations, and unexpected change. Through every season one foundation matters: Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, and his authority reaches how we speak, spend, decide, and respond when we have sinned. A marriage can include affection and admirable effort and still need the life only he gives. Neither spouse can be saved by being a better spouse. A marriage that reflects Christ will never be perfect; it will be two imperfect people continually receiving his grace and responding to his truth. The book ends with an invitation: receive his words, trust his grace, let his teaching shape your responsibilities, love the person beside you with truth and compassion, and keep following Jesus wherever he leads. For some readers the right next step is safety, boundaries, or professional help, and that too is faithful.

Read Scripture in context

Matthew 7 closes the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus describing the wise person who hears his words and acts on them, building on the rock. John 15 reminds followers that fruit comes through remaining in him. Ephesians 5 ties marriage to Christ and the church, and Romans 8 holds out the hope that nothing can separate believers from the love of God in Christ.

Guide without taking over.

Session-specific guidance

Facilitators: end by honoring what each person has done, without ranking progress. Offer an optional way to continue meeting. Remind everyone of confidential professional help for any who need more than discipleship, and that this resource does not guarantee any outcome. Thank couples for trusting you, and do not ask for reports.

Opening

Share one thing you are grateful for from these weeks.

Private couple conversation

As a couple: look at your plan privately. Decide whether and how to continue.

Optional group sharing

Name one next step for yourself. No reports on your spouse.

Facilitator caution

Offer ways to continue. Give resources for professional help. Do not ask for a progress report.

Practice and pray

Write a short plan with one practice, one conversation or step, and one person to ask for help or prayer. Choose a date to look at it again, either together or on your own.

Lord Jesus, we build on you. Keep us hearing your words and doing them. Hold our marriages and our homes, and lead us wherever you go. Amen.

Use the participant workbook's questions for individual reflection. Do not collect private worksheets. A quiet participant is not a failed participant.

Continue with care.

Invite feedback about the pace, questions, and safety of the group. Ask what practices participants want to continue. Do not publish attendance, reflections, or stories without explicit permission.

What helped people engage with Scripture?

What should change in the next group?

How can we continue to encourage one another?

Passing through all sessions does not prove a marriage is healthy or remove the need for professional support. Keep access to help open.