



LEADER'S GUIDE

Christian Marriages: Ideal vs. Real

What God really expects from Christian marriages.

Christians tend to be the ultimate idealists. Of all people, we have the highest aspirations—to become Christlike and to glorify God—so we hold ourselves and other believers to a high standard of godly behavior. We expect Christian marriages to be something bigger and better than secular relationships. Shouldn't Christian homes be peaceful and well-ordered, characterized by constant harmony, a spiritual atmosphere, pure motives, and financial stability?

Whether we acknowledge the truth openly or just worry about it secretly, we all know that our actual marriages do not even come close to measuring up to this ideal. But is an ideal—even one commonly shared by the Christian community—necessarily what God expects of our marriages? The purpose of this study is to see ourselves as God sees us, and to understand his expectations of our time together as married believers.

Lesson #4

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 3:1–14; 4:9–12; Romans 5:6–11; Colossians 3:1–4, 12–17

Based on:

"The Date I'll Never Forget," by Kelli B. Trujillo, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



I N T E R N A T I O N A L

© 2008

Visit www.ChristianBibleStudies.com

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article, "The Date I'll Never Forget" from GiftedforLeadership.com, included at the end of this study.

Have you ever been really, really glad that no one was coming over to notice that you have a less-than-perfect home life? The bed's unmade, tempers have flared, it's been a week since you and your husband prayed together, and possibly even longer since you've been physically intimate. Most married people have these reality-check moments. Like Kelli Trujillo in her article, you know your marriage doesn't keep up with the spiritual Joneses'. It can't be healthy for Christians to live with the niggling sense that we're not measuring up to what our fellow believers expect of us—or perhaps what God expects of us.



But what *does* God expect of our marriages? Doesn't God know that life is messy, and that marriages are complicated by external demands (such as work, church, and parenting) and internal challenges (such as two differing people's expectations and needs)? Actually, God does know it! Scripture is stunningly realistic about the flaws and failures of men and women—and stunningly descriptive of God's provision to redeem our souls and our everyday lives.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Kelli Trujillo describes her ideal husband and her concept of a perfect Christian marriage. Where do you think that set of ideal parameters for marriage came from?
- [Q] Share a "reality check" moment from your own marriage, a time when you felt disappointed because your marriage wasn't living up to a perceived Christian ideal.
- [Q] In your experiences with other believers, have you ever met an older Christian couple, like Betty and Willis in the article, whose relationship seemed strong and enduring? What about their relationship specifically appealed to you?
- [Q] Have your own marital ideals changed over the years of your marriage? If so, how?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Every human being is flawed, but can be redeemed by God.

Read Romans 5:6–11.

As leaders, we know that God's Word gives human beings their true value and character. Scripture is where we find out how God sees us, and his all-knowing view gives married believers a great starting place for seeing and accepting each other. From the Bible, we get a mixed view of ourselves. People are good, because they are created by God in his image (Genesis 1–2). Yet, not one human being has measured up to God's holy standard (Romans



3:10–12, 23). Fortunately, God redeemed us through Christ's death, putting the righteousness of Jesus on every believer. So, without deserving it at all, we have been made worthy of friendship with God.

Who we are before God is reality, and truthfulness about our flaws and forgiveness for each other form a basis for *real*, lasting unity in marriage.

- [Q] From understanding God's holiness and high standard, what do you know about your position of need before God?
- [Q] If you have trusted Christ's work on the Cross to save you, how does God see you now? Your spouse?
- [Q] If you and your spouse both acknowledge your sin, how can that help clear away any pretensions of perfection in your married life?
- [Q] How does having been forgiven yourself help you to extend grace and forgiveness to your spouse?

Teaching point two: God ordains and redeems the ups and downs of everyday life, making everything beautiful in its time.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–14.

God is not laboring under any delusions about what life is like for us. He knows we're flawed, and he knows our world is a fallen and difficult place. In this passage from Ecclesiastes, the writer (possibly King Solomon) creates a poetic list that encompasses nearly all of human experience, including moments of devastating loss as well as triumphant exuberance. Then he says with bedrock confidence in God's sovereign goodness, "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

If we believe that God is in perfect control of our life and times—no matter how hectic, frenzied, or pressured the days may seem to us—we know that we can trust him. We know that we don't have, and won't have, perfect control of our daily lives. An old song says we "trust and obey, for there's no other way." In this fallen world, where our days fluctuate widely between joy and suffering, God is in control, working "all things together for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

- [Q] If you could rewrite the poem from Ecclesiastes 3, which "times" would you just as soon leave off the list?
- [Q] Which of the "times" in this Scripture poem have you and your spouse already experienced in your life together?
- [Q] What do verses 11 and 14 say about the sovereignty of God? Does this aspect of God frustrate you or comfort you?
- [Q] When are you tempted to trust in your own "control," rather than realizing that God is really ordaining and redeeming the events of your life?



Optional Activity: Write your own poetic list of “times” you’ve shared as a couple, adding in your feelings about God and/or your feelings about how far you’ve come together.

Teaching point three: God created people for relationships.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9–12.

God is three-in-one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect relational unity (John 10:30), and human beings are created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). So our human capacities to love, empathize, nurture, encourage, and forgive all derive directly from God’s character. God provided this excellent inheritance on purpose, so that we would enjoy the magnificent blessing of fellowship—camaraderie and teamwork in this life. One of the most meaningful ways that Christians understand and receive God’s love is through accepting the love and friendship of others.

You were made for relationship. You glorify God and his character—and make the most of his gifts—as you live your life in productive and effective teamwork, with the comfort of each other.

- [Q] The partners in this passage aren’t living a trouble-free, ideal life. What challenges do they face together?
- [Q] What aspects of relationship are valued in this short passage?
- [Q] How do the relationship virtues that come out of these verses compare to Trujillo’s description of the Christian subculture’s marital ideals?
- [Q] How has your own marriage weathered times of toil, falling down, coldness, or outside attack?

Optional Activity: Write a paragraph about your own marriage, beginning with the words, “Two are better than one because ...”

Teaching point four: God provides relationship ideals that *really* work.

Read Colossians 3:1–4, 12–17.

God’s relationship parameters prove that he understands that Christians need equipment for dealing with each other’s imperfections, weaknesses, and failures. Verses 12–17 encourage believers to “put on” compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and—above all—love. These relationship “ideals” bear little resemblance to the perfect married people depicted by Kelli Trujillo in her tongue-in-cheek description of the ultimate Christian married couple. The relationship ideals of Colossians 3 come into play in the real, everyday, rubber-meets-the-road, nitty-gritty of your life.

- [Q] The first four verses of Colossians 3 stipulate that Christians are different from other people because they can set their minds on things above. What do you think the “things above” might be, and how would it help your marriage to keep thinking about those things?
- [Q] What do you think a marriage being done “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 17) would look like? How is this different from the “ideal” relationships we tend to expect of Christian marriages?



- [Q] Try to identify a time in the last week when your spouse needed your compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, or patience. How did you show it?
- Can you remember an occasion when your spouse showed you one of these same attributes?
- [Q] How do the imperfections of your life together provide an opportunity for you to “put on” the virtues listed in Colossians 3?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

God is well aware of our human weaknesses and needs; he “remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). He also knows about the challenges and crises we face from day to day. He remains in perfect control, no matter how fast or wild our rollercoaster ups and downs seem to be getting, and he is capably making all things beautiful, in his time. So when God put you in relationship with your spouse, it wasn’t so you could pretend to be the perfect Christian couple. He made you a team to bless and help and comfort one another as you meet the challenges of each day, with the purpose of glorifying him and trusting him together. God’s instructions about how to handle relationships are grounded in nitty-gritty realities: the everyday need for gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and overarching love.

Action Point: Get away together—for a whole weekend, if possible—and revisit your expectations and desires for your marriage. Let the reality of who you both really are—flawed and forgiven by God’s grace—help you as you identify the challenges your marriage currently faces, both the external stressors and the internal relationship issues created by your differences.

One way to reaffirm your commitment to be “two who are better than one,” strengthening and helping each other, might be to create a shared journal. This is especially helpful if one of you finds it hard to talk about feelings or spiritual issues. Each partner can write in the journal, knowing that the other will read it. You might list needs you wish your spouse would pray for, or you may write down ways you are praying for him or her. You might just use the shared journal to put your feelings into words, without the necessity of immediate dialogue. Feel free to use Scripture—any truths about God and his character—to encourage one another, as you trust him together in all the ups and downs of life in the real world.

—Annette LaPlaca is a freelance writer, the author of several books and numerous articles. She has enjoyed her imperfect marriage for 18 years.



Additional Resources



ChristianBibleStudies.com

[-Soul Care for Women Leaders](#)

[-Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)



Each for the Other, Bryan Chapell (Baker, 2006; ISBN 978-0801066-016)



The Five Love Languages, Gary Chapman (Moody, 1992; ISBN 978-1881273-158)



Love and Respect, Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004; ISBN 978-1591451-877)



Becoming Soulmates, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN 978-031219-262)



Trading Places, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2008; ISBN 978-0310272-465)



As For Me and My House: Crafting Your Marriage to Last, Walter Wangerin, Jr. (Nelson, 2001; ISBN 978-0785266-716)



ARTICLE

The Date I'll Never Forget

What is really important in a marriage?

By Kelli B. Trujillo, for the study, "Christian Marriages: Ideal vs. Real"

It was a Friday night. My husband and I had a "date" with two other couples from the small church where we ministered together. One of the couples was about our age, but the other couple, Willis and Betty, was in their late eighties.

We felt a bit awkward at first. How do you get the conversation started with people more than half a century your senior? But soon things began to feel natural as we watched a video and ate caramel corn, shared stories from our lives, and ended the evening with a rousing "hymn sing," which Willis enthusiastically led on accordion while my husband tried to keep up on guitar.



And that was that.

Yet that night jumps out time and time again in my mind as I think about my own marriage. What am I aiming for here? What *really* is marital "bliss"?

There's a reason for my incessant questioning on the subject. I've realized that one of the causes of conflict in our marriage has been the notion of the "Ideal Christian Marriage." It's a dangerous mythology many Christian women hold fast to. It prompts us to long for a husband who is an enduringly romantic, emotionally expressive, spiritual giant; who prays for and about everything, treats us like royalty, and quotes Song of Songs during nightly lovemaking. It's an ideal marriage of kindred spirits who understand each other at all times, who minister together with dogged determination, who consistently spur each other on in faith, who live adventurous and exciting lives, and who can't ever quite keep their hands off each other.

All hyperbole aside, this idea persists for many women, especially those of us who serve in ministry leadership roles. We can feel at times as if all eyes are on us, as if every aspect of our lives—including our marriage—must be exemplary. And so we allow this unrealistic ideal to take root in our thinking. Then when our marriage doesn't measure up, we feel disappointed, gypped, or frustrated.

This Christian-marriage mythology must be torn out by the roots. Something new, something authentic and human, needs to spring up in its place.



My time with Willis and Betty planted some seeds in my life; new perspectives on what *really matters* in marriage are beginning to germinate. These ideas aren't flashy, exciting, or even sexy. But they *mean* something.

Willis and Betty had many adventures in their six decades together. But the proof in the pudding was the thousands of everyday-days they spent together, the "mundane" routine of friendship, the regularly worn path through time that had become constant and trustworthy. I'm learning to recognize the immeasurable value of **long-spirited companionship**. It's an aspect of love that's undervalued and unnoticed in our world. It's the truly remarkable companionship of those "who have seen the new moon grow old together," as Madeleine L'Engle described in her series of marriage poems, "To a Long Loved Love."

I'm also inspired by the comfort in **spiritual openness** Willis and Betty displayed. During our late-night conversation, they disagreed feistily at times about issues of Christian life, they spoke of the humdrum moments of faith, and they shared honestly about seasons of darkness and doubt. There was no element of trying to impress one another spiritually, no need to be false or showy. Nor was there a desire to be intensely private. For them it was definitely a shared journey—a travail of two people side-by-side on a road of ups and downs and sometimes sharp turns.

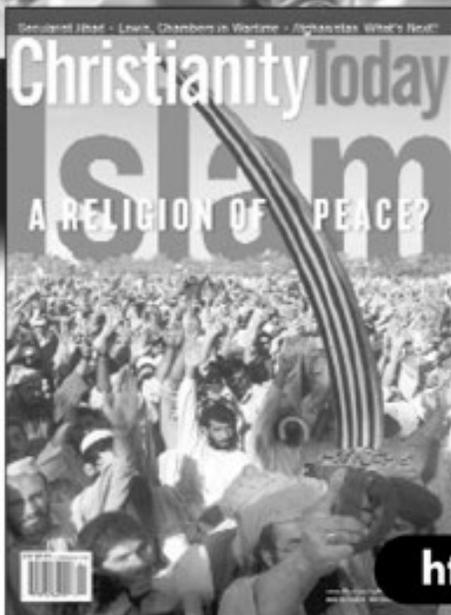
And perhaps the most significant growing seed from my memory of that night is the **laugher**—the inside jokes Willis and Betty had, winking at each other with sly glances; the loud guffaws and snorts; the noiseless chuckling fits. They clearly had learned how to laugh not only with each other, but also at *themselves*. This is a powerful secret of true marital happiness: not taking oneself too seriously, being willing to surrender rightness or pride or position and instead chortle a bit at one's own selfishness or faults or willfulness. It reflects a firm sense of being human—not superhuman—and a determination to allow one's spouse to be the same.

—Kelli B. Trujillo is a writer and editor, a mom of two, a morning coffee-drinker, and an avid reader. Her newest book is The Busy Mom's Guide to Spiritual Survival.

"The Date I'll Never Forget," by Kelli B. Trujillo, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, April 12, 2007



UNDERSTAND THE WORLD



For a trustworthy Christian perspective on current issues, trends, and news, turn to **Christianity Today** magazine. You'll get reliable facts and views to help you make wise decisions in our ever-changing world.

Each issue will inform and challenge you with timely news coverage, compelling articles, and thought-provoking editorials. Subscribe today and SAVE! To get 3 risk-free trial issues, go to:

http://christianitytoday.com/go/ctmag_ad