

Choosing Unselfishness over Selfishness



Ronald Welch, PsyD

*Experience: Professor of Counseling;
Over twenty years of experience in the field of
clinical psychology*



Welcome to lesson 2 in this series about making choices that are going to transform your marriage. Today we want to talk about the idea of unselfishness versus selfishness and forgiveness in that process. And the lesson that we're going to use and we're going to focus on from the Bible is one you are well familiar with: Ephesians 5 and the passage that talks about the interactions between wives and husbands.

And the thing I want you to think about in this passage as we work through it is to think about the word submission itself and how easy it would be for people to take that word submission in our popular vernacular and how we hear it and turn that into power and control. And you'll notice the second who I said, people doing that. What I mean is me, and let me explain a bit about the first book that I wrote that's called *The Controlling Husband*.

This was not a book by a psychologist writing about controlling people. This was a book about me writing about my marriage and the difficulties my wife had to go through being married to me for many years early in our relationship. I came from a family where my mother was a fairly anxious person. She was wonderful. I loved her to death, but she was one of those people that the glass wasn't just half full; it was draining rapidly, if you know what I mean. My dad was fairly strong, a strong personality, and he was the dominant person in the household. And I grew up learning that. That was where I learned about what marriages look like.

They were very godly people. They followed God's Word, and they taught me God's Word in many different ways. And I learned to incorporate that, but I did have an image that there was a higher power and lower power partner. And what happens in marriage is that you have this process of power and control.

And in my marriage, it looked like this. Initially, when I would ask my wife, "Where do you want to go for dinner?" What I really





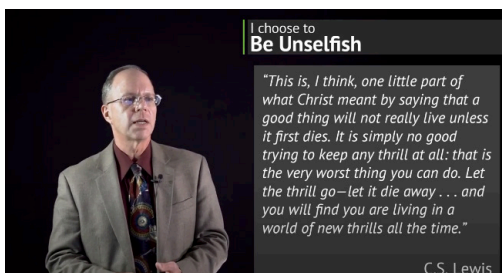
meant—and this is going to sound manipulative because it is—is, “What would you like to talk about, so I can tell you how good barbecue would be and I can convince you that we really should have barbecue for dinner.” I didn’t mean, what would you like for dinner, as in let me go take you where you want for dinner. That’s a very strong statement of how many things worked in our marriage.

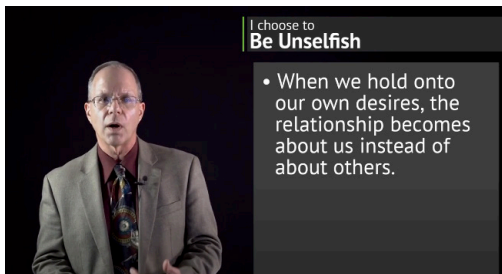
On our first anniversary, my wife said, “You’re treating me like a bird in a gilded cage. You don’t seem to be honoring and valuing me.” And the Bible was my guide. I was living what I thought was a godly life, but I was so focused on myself and what I needed I couldn’t see how much I was drowning her in the process. She came from a family where she grew up with a very dominant medical doctor as a father who was very controlling. And she got used to that. And so when she married me, it seemed like a good match.

The problem is, I wasn’t honoring God. I wasn’t honoring my wife. I wasn’t honoring my family. And I remember to this day, there was a moment when I started seeing my sons ordering her around. My oldest son was saying, “Hey, why didn’t you pick me up here at this time?” Or, “Why weren’t you there?” And I gave him the dad lecture: Don’t talk to your mom that way. And then God just slapped me across the face and said, “Who do you think is teaching them how to undervalue women and how to discourage women when you’re in relationships?”

And I wish I could say, boy, that was great. God performed a miracle. I became a wonderful husband and thirty-three years have been awesome. It took about ten years for me to be able to overcome some of the challenges I had in my personality, because I was very insecure and I was trying to control things because I was scared that it wouldn’t be okay if I didn’t. I didn’t trust God or know how even to do that. And my wife was part of a learned helplessness experience, where she got used to it and settled for that.

What I do know is that after many years I was able to work with God to try to become a husband that would honor her in the process. At the same time, it took another four or five years for her to believe that it was real. She kept thinking, Oh, wait, it’s been six months and you’re doing really good, but there’s Ron. I know what Ron’s going to look like. One of the things that I think may help you understand this a little bit is a statement from C.S.

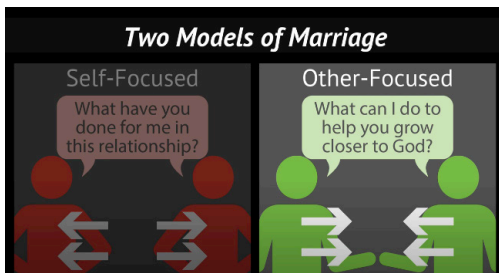




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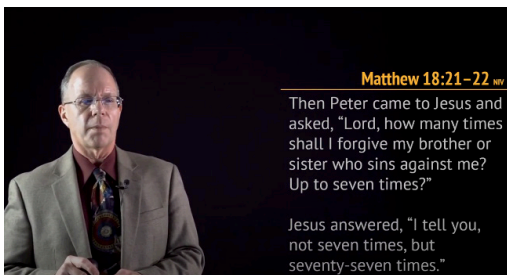
And he said, “This is, I think, one little part of what Christ meant by saying that a good thing will not really live unless it first dies. It is simply no good trying to keep any thrill at all: that is the very worst thing you can do. Let the thrill go—let it die away . . . and you will find you are living in a world of new thrills all the time.” When we hold onto our own desires, when we believe what we want is what matters, then the relationship becomes about us instead of about others. And I believe, right now, there are two models of marriage in the world right now.

One model is very much all about me. And you see this in our 50 percent divorce rate, in the number of unhappy couples that stay married. You see it in statements like, “It’s all about me” and “What have you done for me in this relationship?” and “You’re not pulling your weight.” And then there’s another model of marriage based on biblical principles that we showed when we started talking about Ephesians 5 in the beginning of this lesson.

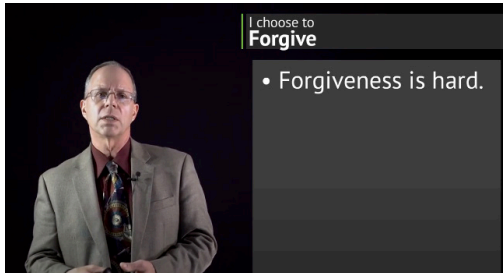


And that marriage is all based on the other. It’s based on me wanting to know how I can help my wife grow closer to God and on her trying to engage with me in ways that can help me grow closer to God. That requires trust. And we’ll talk about that in another lesson in this series, but re-imagine how that works. Instead of me trying to force her to give me what I want and vice versa, I’m trying to do everything in my power to help her become the woman God wants her to be—give her all the opportunities to thrive, grow, develop—and she’s doing the same for me.

I have her back. She has my back. I don’t have to try to force my desires on her and vice versa. And that is absolutely countercultural. That is everything that the current marriage that many couples I work with talk about, is not. And that’s because a lot of times the Christian model is exactly the opposite of what the culture’s suggesting.



The second part of this lesson for today is based on forgiveness. And I want to remind you of Matthew 18, which I’m sure all of you are familiar with, but listen to the language again. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” That language becomes real when you think about your relationship.



Remember that thing that you might've recently thought about with your partner? Think of something that you were just frustrated by, one of those daily hassles like, "I can't believe she did that again." Or, "How could she do this?" And then think about forgiving them seventy-seven times. Think about the amount of . . . I have couples that walk in, not saying, "I don't know how to forgive them for this affair, Dr. Welch," but "How, Dr. Welch, can I forgive him for having an affair three times and lying about it in between two times and going to counseling with me while he was lying about it the third time? How do I believe he's golfing when every other time he was golfing, he was with her?"

Those are hard, hard things. And I'm aware that some of you in the audience who are listening to me right now have those hard issues that you're dealing with. What I know forgiveness is not, I can tell you this much, I know it's not, "I can't let this go. I don't trust you. I'm not letting it go." It's not, "I forgive you, but I won't forget." That's the scorecard mentality. You know what I mean? Where you have, "I still have three things that you owe me, because you did three things last week." The scorecard doesn't work.

And I know that forgiveness isn't, "Nah, that's just who you are. I don't think you can change. I'm settling for this. This is the best it can be." What I do know is that the Catholic Church has an interesting process that they've gone through in terms of describing this. And I think it's very important that we think about this. I think it's a four-step process, and it's seen in some of the words that are problematic now in a lot of Christian-worldview words like repentance where people push back a little bit saying, "What do you mean repentance? Forgiveness is just . . . you ask for forgiveness and you're done."

You know how it is in language right now. It's like "My bad. My bad. We're done. I'm sorry." And it's like, well, you know what? Just because you said you're sorry doesn't mean this is all done with, right? What I think happens is you ask for forgiveness. And when you're asking for forgiveness, you're saying, "I'm going to show you that I can never be the kind of person that did that again. I'm going to work my hardest to go to counseling or to learn from mentors or to spend hours with my pastor, to meet with God, to learn biblical passages that will help me understand how to change my behavior. But I'm promising you that I'm going to do what's called demonstrating repentance. I'm going to do my due diligence to be a better person."

4 Stages of Forgiveness (Reconciliation)			
Asking for Forgiveness	Demonstrating Repentance	Offering Forgiveness	Trusting in Future Success



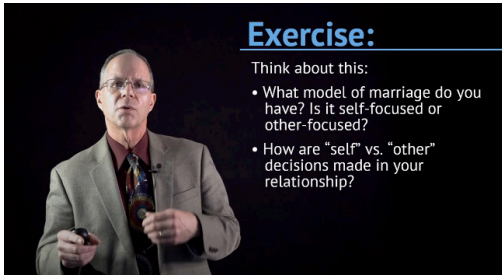
Remember I told you with my wife, even after I did that, it took her several years before she believed it was real. People have to sometimes earn forgiveness in a relationship. I know that doesn't fit with the concept of grace. I'm not talking about grace. I'm not talking about how God forgave us without us doing anything to earn it in any way, shape, or form. That's just because God's cool. And He loves us and He did what we needed.

This is: I want to show you that I can be a better person. If I can do that, I would like you to consider offering forgiveness. And I want you to say, I want you to think to yourself before I say, "I forgive you," I want to ask you if maybe what you mean is that you're going to start believing that that thing that they did never actually happened, that you're going to truly trust them and treat them as if they didn't do what was so offensive to you.

I wonder what would happen in your relationship if forgiveness looked like this. You end up saying, "I'm sorry." And "I'm sorry" doesn't mean we're done with the interchange. It means, "I really want you to understand how hard I'm going to work to be different." And then the other person basically says, "Wow, I believe it." Have you ever seen a situation where someone apologizes and someone says, "That's not sincere"?

You know why? It's because they haven't proven that they really mean it. It's not from their heart. And in addition, they're not showing any actions that lead to change at the same time. I mentioned to you that in my marriage we had a lot of difficulty with these challenges over the years. And it helped that I married a saint, and I did, which is a good thing, but she really struggled with the idea of saying, "Boy, forgiveness means I've got to expect you to succeed." That last part for her trusting that I was going to be, she affectionately calls it "old Ron" and "new Ron." She wondered if I was going to be that guy permanently. And she'll talk to me about the fact—and we do a lot of marriage conferences and speaking in a lot of churches—and one of the things we talk about is her understanding of trusting God to do His work in me and my understanding of trusting God to allow her to be loved and empowered and encouraged and grow.

One of the things I want you to think about this week in terms of lessons that you could do is I want you to think about what model of marriage do you have? Is your marriage based on selflessness, unselfishness, focusing on the other, or are you really more focused on yourself and what you want and what you need?

**Exercise:**

Think about this:

- What model of marriage do you have? Is it self-focused or other-focused?
- How are "self" vs. "other" decisions made in your relationship?

And you'll see that if you look at the decisions you make, even something like, "Where do you want to go for dinner?" ask yourself if you mean that. Or if you mean, "Let's talk about where we want to go for dinner so I can tell you where I want to go." Okay? If you can do that, and if you can also really watch for how self or other decisions are made in your relationship, I think you'll be able to see you can start taking control of that. And you can make choices that lead to transformation in your marriage, both in the way you view each other and the kind of relationship you have and how much you honor, empower, and grow each other in God's love.