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Presentation Transcript

God-Based Marriage, The Organizing Principle 6 – Emotional Connection

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In the previous presentation of this series, which is about the *Organizing Principles of a God-Based Marriage*, we covered the concept of having one's mate's back. Now I covered this is the most rudimentary way, using every day examples. And I also mentioned in the end of that presentation that having one's mate's back in these daily scenarios tends to create an emotional closeness, but I didn't go any further with it. And that's because we're going much deeper today as we discuss another organizing principle of a God-based marriage – that of emotional connection. So let's get started.

I counsel couples sometimes. I put together an approach that partly came from my counseling training and partly from the Bible. When I started my master's degree, I was careful to discard any training that did not square with the Bible. I found later that I didn't have anything to worry about, because the only modalities that I learned were ones that had proven to work. And the reason they work is because they're basically founded on biblical principles. God invented marriage and the only principles that work are ultimately Godly. And sometimes people discover those, though they don't know that's what they've discovered.

So I run into people quite often that want Christian counseling. Especially with marriage problems, we can see that Christian counseling is not always necessary because marriage is for everybody, not just Christians. It says that in the Bible. Consequently, a marriage counselor who is effective will work quite nicely – because it doesn't have to be about doctrine. It could be about relationships, for example. Consequently, a marriage counselor who is effective will work quite nicely for most people's needs. Most of the problems we have are not caused by anything spiritual. They're mostly just human nature issues. It seems only obvious. So somebody's who is versed in dealing with human nature issues can usually help us. Now, rarely, there are some times some issue that's related to doctrinal things or spiritual issues, but most of the time the problems church people have are the same kinds of problems everybody else has in marriage. So you don't

need a Christian counselor. And that gets us back to the organizing principle we're working on today – emotional connection.

Now God has a plan for a loving family. That's what His plan is about. It's about having a loving family. So, in Ephesians 1:7, let's begin reading there.

Ephesians 1:7 – *In Him we have redemption through His blood – the forgiveness of our trespasses – according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him – things in heaven and things on earth.*

So what form is this plan for unity going to take? Will it be a corporation? A movement? An army? How's it going to be organized? Well, we're told that Jesus is the Firstborn of many brothers. And we're told that God is our Father, not our CEO. So the plan is about God's family that he's creating. That's what the plan is.

So what happens when people get married? Well, they have kids and then they're a family. Right? So that's how marriage fits into this. In Ephesians 2:9, Paul said:

Ephesians 2:19 – *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*

So every aspect of God's work on earth contains elements of that direction. I mean, we have ADHD and loss of focus because we watch too much video and all that sort of thing. God's not like that. He's been focused for eons on that *one* thing that He's after – and that is, a family. So marriage is to help us become Godlike in our relationships.

Now there are lots of people that aren't married, and marriage isn't the only way you can learn that. But, for those who *are* married, that's what's set before them – to learn how to live as a member of the household of God in God's family.

So it's no surprise that one of the principles of a successful marriage is emotional connection. Nearly every time God mentions His relationship with us, it's about how much He *loves* us. That gets in there somewhere, one way or another – how much He's right there for us, how available He is to us at all times. Look with me at this scripture – in Ephesians 1:3.

Ephesians 1:3 – *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*

He's done everything He can do to help us draw close to Him. He's spared no resource. He's done *everything* He can do to help us draw close to Him. He *completely* has our back. And that's

the most important part of marriage, too, isn't it? Even nature teaches us that. What do I mean by that?

Well, we talked a little bit, I think, last time about attachment theory. When a baby is lying in a crib crying, they usually cry because something is wrong. They're too hot. They're too cold. They're wet. They're dirty. They're hungry. They're feeling alone – isolated. They don't like that and all those things could kill that baby if it isn't attended to. Now, babies don't know about time. They don't know, "I'll change your diaper after I put in this load of laundry." They don't get that. It's got to happen now. When mom comes and picks up the baby, and she talks baby talk to it, and she either starts to nurse the baby or she warms up the bottle, she's looking into the baby's eyes, and then she's looking the task – heating up the bottle – and she looks back at the baby, she smiles, she talks baby talk to it. The baby looks at the mother – into the mother's eyes – and so there is an attachment – a connection – going on – an emotional connection that's positive. And that makes the baby feel how? Safe, secure, loved. It feels like everything's going to be okay. And so the baby starts calming itself down.

So what John Bowlby taught us, in the attachment theory of the fifties, is that attachment that forms between a mother and an infant, it stays the same all the rest of our lives. The need to be supported, and to have somebody have our back, and provide us the things that we need – that's always present with us. That's why it's so important to connect to God, because He can provide the things nobody else can. But that early attachment pattern sets a pattern for our whole lives. It's been proven by watching people from infancy all the way to late old age that the style we learn as an infant follows us all our lives. And that means that emotional connection is the most important thing in a person's life, unless they've given up on it. So, unless they've given up on it – and why would anybody get married if they know they don't really need anybody else, or think they don't – that would also be the most important thing in their marriage. So it only makes sense, then, that the point of focus to resolve any marital issue is the health of their emotional connection. If that's strong, everything else is going to be resolvable.

So, in her book, *Hold Me Tight*, Sue Johnson details the elements of emotional closeness in marriage. The first one is *accessibility*. Can I reach you? "If we go back to the time" – and this is something from her research – but she says, "If we go back to the time a marriage problem begins, it always starts with one of them reaching out to make a connection and not finding the other person accessible" – you know, "Where were you when I needed you? Were you off playing video games or watching TV? Or, were you too upset about work to be in the room with me? Where were you?" Also notice, most of the time, that the one asking these questions – if it's gotten really bad – is so consumed with their own emotional starvation, that they don't realize they are also unavailable. So the gap widens as this starts to develop.

The next thing that she details is *responsiveness*. "Can I depend on you to respond to me emotionally?" If you want to know what this looks like, think of that mother who comes in to feed the hungry baby. We just went over that. The mother's responding. She's meeting the baby's

needs. She talks baby talk, looks into the baby's eyes intermittently, while she gets ready to take care of the child. And that makes the baby feel secure and connected. So that's what marriage is all about, too. It's really exactly the same. It never changes. It's just that different things make us feel secure when we're a baby as when we're an adult. It's just what John Bowlby was talking about. Sue Johnson, in her book *Hold Me Tight*, says, the way she learned this important principle is, she went back to the video tapes that she'd made of her clients and watched what was going on the moment things turned away from the negative and became positive. She saw that there was an emotional connection being created between the couple.

Of course, this has been in the Bible all along, hasn't it? We know that Jesus talked about how much He loved the disciples the night before He died. We have God's attestation over and over in the scriptures – that He cares about us, that He's there for us. But here's one that is particularly meaningful to me. It's in 1 Thessalonians 2:4. Paul is talking to this congregation in a letter he wrote them. And he said:

1 Thessalonians 2:4-8 – *...but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness to that truth. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But instead we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves – which is what he's doing right there. He's sharing his heart with them about how he feels about them – because you had become very dear to us.*

So here's the apostle Paul, who has been characterized by some as sort of a gruff, tough-love kind of guy, and he's showing us that he could be that way when it was necessary, but what was underneath all of that was love for his congregation. He was emotionally connected to them. And he was also the one who told husbands that they were to love their wives like Christ loved the church. And how was that exactly? Well, let's talk about the next point – and the final one – which is *emotional engagement*. “Do I know you will value me and stay close?”

You know, you're mate comes in exhausted and discouraged about events at the office and expresses that discouragement and anger about it, and you're also exhausted, so you disconnect from your feelings and say, “Suck it up, buttercup. Life is hard!” Or, you flood your mate with advice about how to deal with the situation. Or, you shrug it off and start fixing dinner, working out, playing video games, or whatever. No, no! You put aside your own exhaustion for the moment and emotionally come along side your mate, reflecting the feelings that you hear, and show concern – show that you're available and that you can be reached. That's how we communicate to our mate that they're more important than work or even than our own emotional state at the moment. And when we connect emotionally that way, we're meeting a deep-seated need for connection that God has built into every person that draws them closer and helps them

feel secure and loved. And that helps them love back. So, when that happens, a spiral starts going from negative to positive. It gets stronger and better. And this process is what love is!

You know, there's a story of Israelites in Egypt. There they started out as free people, but, as they grew rich from all their hard work and strong, the Egyptians became afraid of them, so they enslaved them. That's what happens when you have a malevolent ruler. They were treated terribly. And God saw what was happening. Then He drew close and listened to their anguished cries. That's the language He used – that He *listened*. And then He sent Moses to communicate His accessibility, responsiveness and engagement with His people. See, God invented that process. I know Sue Johnson discovered it in her book, but God's the One that invented that. It's one of the organizing principles of marriage. So we see it in His promise to cover us with His grace and love. So marriage is a practice field for this kind of relationship.

Now, if you talk to enough people about their marriages, you soon learn that there are sort of predictable negative patterns that can develop in human relationship. One that I see quite a lot of is that, when one person blames the other for not meeting some expectation or responsibility, then the other one withdraws from that accusation or blame. And the more the one mate withdraws, the more the other mate feels alone and unsupported, so the more they complain and attack, which makes their mate withdraw even more. So this places the couple in a downward, hurtful spiral. Pretty soon, both of them feel like the other has withdrawn emotionally from them. No one has anyone's back. Instead, there's sort of a war going on between them. That's just one observed pattern that people can get into. There are others.

When Jesus asked the Father to let Him bypass the need to be crucified – but He also said, “Not My will, but Your will” – God sent angels to minister to Him. He had to go through with it, but God was with Him. God had His back. And three days later, we learn that in spades when He resurrected Him from the dead. Emotional connection is at the core of their relationship. And it's really at the core of every marriage.

But there's also some good news here about this. It's not as hard to fix that as a lot of people think. Only when people are extremely hard-headed, or extremely damaged from their past, is it difficult. Researchers have seen that, if people can find a way to be there for each other, any problems that come up are usually viewed as just challenges to be overcome, rather than something that's going to wreck their marriage. And that makes so much sense, doesn't it? Because, if the core thing is strong, then everything else can be taken care of.

How would you like to know how you're doing? Well, in Sue Johnson's book, she has a little survey, and I'm going to make a copy of that and put it on liferesource.org. You can go to the Website, and look up this presentation, and there'll be a link on the page for this presentation about this survey. So that might be something that might be helpful to you.

So, okay, when there are problems, what can be done? *Hold Me Tight*, by Sue Johnson, is a book

you could read, if you want to become more educated about that. I think they have some workbooks you can work through, too. You might be able to find an EFT workshop near you to go to – Emotional Freedom Therapy is what that stands for. Or, you might find a therapist nearby. I think finding that kind of therapist is going to save you a lot of time, because they'll just get right to it. So, as I mentioned earlier, this isn't a church problem, it's a human problem, so they don't have to be in our church to understand what needs to be done. A therapist who works with all kinds of people and knows how marriages work is going to be helpful.

What do I do personally? How do I do that? Well, I try to focus on the issue from several different angles. I use EMDR to reduce any hurts that might be interfering. You know, people come to marriage quite often with a lot of sensitivities. And they are hyper-sensitive to the way their mate acts because of the way they were treated by their parents sometimes. So that makes it nearly impossible for their mate to please them, because they're getting triggered by their mate about past things that occurred long ago. EMDR is very effective at cleaning that part up. Sometimes I have people that want marriage counseling, and I see where the problems are right away, and I just start them both doing EMDR, and I'd say about half the time, there isn't any need for couples therapy after they take care of what was causing their problems to begin with. So, clearing out the wreckage that both of them brought to the marriage is good. I then use relational enhancement therapy to teach them good communication skills. It takes good communication to get down to the emotional connection that needs to be made sometimes. And then, after doing those, I focus on the core issue, which is the emotional disconnect itself. By that time, we've taken care of the past that might be contaminating the field, and we learn how to communicate in an effective way – so the people are meeting each other face to face instead of missing everything. When that's in place, then they're much more able to deal effectively the emotional disconnects that have occurred in their relationship and then they have the tools they need to solve their own problems.

Of course, even if we do our best to be there for our mate, problems can still come up. We don't live in the Kingdom of God yet. We live in the devil's world. So next time, we're going to talk about good communication in marriage. I'm going to show you just what it takes to be able to communicate in an effective way.

Don't forget to check out that survey on our Website, liferesource.org. The link will be on the presentation page for this presentation, *Emotional Connection – the God-Based Marriage*.

So until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.