

# AT-HOME MARRIAGE PREP COURSE

*Real conversations*

*Real connection*

*In your own space*

by Ralph Griggs, MTh

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## From the Author

Hi there—I'm Ralph, a lifelong non-denominational Christian minister, a husband, a dad to four grown kids, and "Papa" to four grandkids. Basically, I've graduated from diapers to diplomas and everything in between. I've spent my life walking alongside people in all stages of life, love, and faith.



### **So, why offer a marriage preparation guide?**

Because I've seen what happens when things fall apart—and trust me, it's not pretty. I've seen it in churches, in extended family, and in the quiet heartbreak behind closed doors. I've also seen what *actually works* (hint: it's not just "never go to bed angry," though that helps). Nothing lights a fire in me quite like helping couples get off to a solid start—preferably without needing a fire extinguisher later.

### **Why should you listen to anything I have to say?**

Well, aside from my years of ministry and graduate work in counseling and marriage education, I've also had the honor of helping thousands of couples tie the knot. And more often than not, before the "I do," we sat at my kitchen table with coffee and a few laughs (and maybe a box of tissues, just in case), having real, down-to-earth conversations about what marriage really looks like—after the cake's been cut and the tuxes go back to the rental place.

This guide is the result of those years of talking, listening, and learning—designed to help couples like you build a strong foundation. I don't claim it'll change the world, but if it helps a few couples sidestep the landmines and build something solid (and maybe even a little bit magical), I'll consider it time well spent.

And if nothing else, at least you'll be able to say, "Well, we *did* try that marriage prep thing with the guy who calls himself 'Papa.'"

A Quick Disclaimer:

This guide is not a magic crystal ball. It won't predict your future or guarantee success. I'm not a licensed therapist, and this isn't meant to replace professional counseling. But if this guide gets you thinking and talking in ways that matter—great. If it surfaces issues that feel too tough to tackle alone, then please consider reaching out to a licensed counselor or a trusted minister. Bottom line? You'll get out of this guide what you're willing to put into it. Here's to doing the work—and doing it together

# HOW THIS COURSE CAN HELP YOU

How did you learn to ride a bike?

You didn't do it by listening to a long lecture titled "The Mechanics and Philosophy of Bicycle Riding." Nope. Someone gave you a few basic instructions, maybe ran alongside you for a bit, and then let go. You wobbled, maybe tipped over once or twice, but you got back on—and with a little persistence, you figured it out. And hey, it was fun!

You were highly motivated from the inside out. The excitement about what was possible kept you going. You didn't think of it as "work" even though you were sweating, falling, and scraping your knees. You just couldn't wait to ride again.

That same spirit applies to preparing for marriage.

For years, I told couples, "You've got to work on your marriage!" But from the looks on their faces, I could tell they weren't thrilled with the idea. I mean, most folks are thinking, "*I already work all week—now you're telling me I have to come home and work on my marriage, too?*"

Yes, a great relationship takes effort—but let's not call it drudgery. Think of it as attention, intention, and learning how to keep your connection strong. That's exactly what this course is for.

Here's what I've come to believe:

1. **Marriage is supposed to be fun—it should sizzle.**
2. **If couples keep enjoying each other, a lot of potential problems just won't show up.**
3. **Most people won't keep growing their relationship if it feels like punching a clock.**

With that in mind, this course is designed based on how people learn best:

- When learning is **self-directed** and **self-motivated**
- When they're **actively involved**
- When they're **having fun**

This course is structured to check all those boxes. You'll think, laugh, talk, and maybe even disagree in productive ways.

*"You can tell people what they need to know very fast. But they will forget what you tell them even faster. People are more likely to understand what they figure out for themselves than what you figure out for them."*

—from *101 Ways to Make Training Active* by Mel Silberman

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# GOING BEYOND THIS COURSE

This course is a great start—but don't stop here. Here are a few other things you can do to keep building your foundation:

1. Face-to-face premarital counseling with a minister or licensed therapist
2. Attend marriage prep seminars at a church or retreat center
3. Join a marriage mentoring program (many churches offer them)
4. Read books or listen to marriage-related audiobooks/podcasts and talk about them together

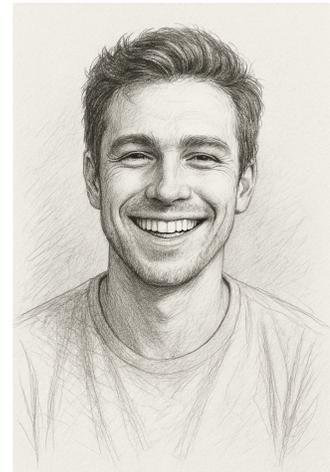
Not sure which one to try? This course will help you zero in on areas where you'd benefit from a little more conversation or coaching.

Now let's be real—no marriage prep, no matter how good, will solve every future issue. Life has a way of handing you challenges you never saw coming. But what this kind of preparation *can* do is reduce the number of unpleasant surprises—and help you deal with the rest as a team.

**Best wishes as you get ready for life together as husband and wife!**

~ Ralph

P.S. Fun fact: This has been called “the course even guys love.” Honestly, I've had as many (or more) men as women tell me how much they enjoyed it. Go figure!



# BEFORE YOU START

Before diving into the couple exercises, take a moment to review the following principles. They might just save your sanity (and your Saturday).

1. **Communication takes time.** Make the time. Keep making the time. It's the lifeblood of your relationship.
2. **Truly listen to each other—without judgment.** Want to test whether you understood your partner? Try repeating what you think they said, using your own words. If you're way off, they'll let you know.
3. **Be honest and open about your thoughts and feelings.** This goes both ways. Share what's going on with you, and be ready to receive what your partner shares.
4. **Every relationship has conflict.** Repeat after me: this is normal. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus—and sometimes Earth feels like a battleground. When conflict happens:



▶ **Deal with it.** Don't ignore it. Unresolved issues like to fester. Resentment ages poorly.

▶ **Control your anger.** Anger shuts off communication. If needed, take a walk and cool off—but don't walk away forever. Come back to it.

▶ **Define the problem clearly.** What's really going on? How might *each* of you be contributing?

▶ **Brainstorm possible solutions.** Then agree on one, try it out, and see how it goes.

▶ **Stay committed.** Working through stuff gives you confidence that your relationship can weather storms. That builds trust—and trust builds security.

▶ **Seek outside help if needed.** Don't wait until you're both waving the white flag. Ministers, therapists, and trained counselors are there for a reason.

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**The last two pages of this course have the info on how to get your completion certificate!**

# Section One: Two-Fun Learning Activities

## EXERCISE 1: WHO'S RIGHT?

Let's settle a question that every couple has wondered at some point: "Who's right?"

When I do premarital counseling, I love using a simple hand trick to make a point. I'll hold my hand out—palm facing the groom—and ask each partner to describe what they see.

The groom sees lines, knuckles, and fingernails. The bride sees the palm, lifelines, maybe a few calluses. Same hand. Different descriptions.

So, who's right?

They both are. They're just seeing the same thing from different perspectives.

That's one of the biggest benefits of listening to your partner: it helps you see things from their side of the table. And once you understand that you're not always *opposites*, just viewing things differently, it gets a whole lot easier to communicate, compromise, and connect.

### Discuss Together:

1. Is there a subject you've been discussing where there's no clear "right" or "wrong"?
2. How might this idea of "perspective" change how you approach disagreements?
3. What are some areas in which men and women commonly have different viewpoints?



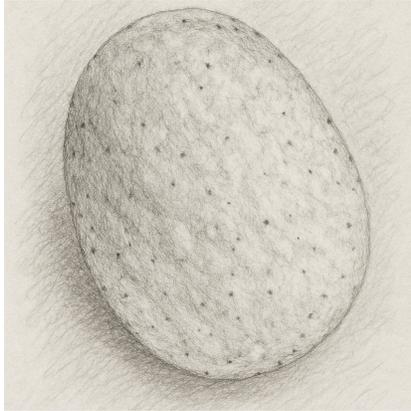
### Notes & Reflections:

(Use this space to jot down your thoughts or what you discovered during the conversation)



## EXERCISE 2: STUPID IS AS STUPID DOES

Let's talk about something universal: **stupid arguments**. Yes, we all have them.



Here's one for the books: A husband is sitting on the couch, happily snacking on a bag of LAYS potato chips. Out comes *the biggest potato chip he's ever seen*. It's a beauty. He holds it in the air like it's a trophy, admiring it like he grew it himself. Then his wife, with perfect comic timing, reaches over and crunches it.

Boom. Argument.

Isn't it amazing how something so small can turn into a full-blown squabble?

Now it's your turn. Think back on a stupid argument you've had—or overheard (no names, we promise).

### Reflect & Discuss:

1. What made the argument stupid?
2. Why do you think it became an argument in the first place?
3. How could it have been avoided?

And if the two of you tend to argue more than you'd like, take it a step further:

- Are there specific times or conditions where arguments are more likely (late at night, hungry, stressed)?
- Could you come up with some "rules of engagement" for handling differences?
- Do you believe every disagreement has to be resolved?
- What do you do when you hit a true stalemate?

### Notes & Reflections:

(Use this space to record your answers or just have a good laugh together. Humor helps!)

## EXERCISE 3: FIX THIS PROBLEM

Time to flip the script—you're the counselor now. Think of this as relationship role-play (minus the therapist's office and leather couch). Below are some real-world scenarios couples face. What would *you* say to help them through it?

### **Situation 1:**

**She loves when her family drops in unannounced. He thinks it's rude and inconsiderate.**

How do you balance hospitality with personal space?

### **Situation 2:**

**He bought a brand-new truck without asking her. She's furious—they're barely covering bills as it is.**

How do you decide what counts as a joint decision?

### **Situation 3:**

**She's ready to have a baby. He says, "Not yet."**

How do you navigate major life-timing decisions when you're on different pages?

### **Now take it further:**

Think about couples you know—friends, coworkers, maybe even family. (No gossiping or naming names!) Pick one issue you've seen others wrestle with and talk about how *you* would try to fix it.

This isn't about judging others—it's about exploring your own approach to problem-solving. You'll probably learn a lot about how your partner thinks, too.

### **Discuss Together:**

- What principles do you both value when solving a problem?
- Do you tend to respond with emotion, logic, avoidance, humor?
- Are there patterns in how your families handled conflict that show up now?



### **Notes & Reflections:**

(Write down your advice, reactions, or your new strategy for navigating surprise trucks and baby clocks.)

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## EXERCISE 4: MY UNCLE LEFT ME A MILLION DOLLARS!

Let's have a little fun—because sometimes dreaming reveals a lot more than budgeting ever could.

Imagine this: your favorite uncle just left you a million dollars. No strings attached. No taxes. Just pure, spend-it-however-you-want cash.

So... what would you do?

Would you quit your job? Pay off debt? Start a business?  
Travel the world? Start a cat sanctuary?

Take a few minutes to write down your answers separately—really think about what you'd do if money wasn't the issue. Then come together and compare notes. You might be surprised at what your dreams reveal about you:

- Values
- Priorities
- Aspirations
- Secret hopes

This exercise isn't really about money—it's about vision. When you understand what your partner *wants*, you begin to understand who they *are*.



### **Notes & Reflections:**

(Use this space to jot down your millionaire fantasies and what they tell you about each other.)



## Section Two: Discover More About Each Other

### EXERCISE 1: MY BEST FAMILY VACATION

This one's simple but powerful. Each of you take a few minutes to describe your **favorite family vacation** growing up. What made it so memorable? Where did you go? What did you do? Was it the place, the people, or maybe the spontaneous disasters that became funny stories later?

It's amazing how much you can learn about each other from a single story.

**Side note:** Gary Smalley—who's spent years speaking and writing about marriage and family—once said that when he asked thousands of people about their most bonding family experience, one answer came up more than any other: *camping*.

There's just something about it:

- The shared adventure
- The unpredictable problems
- The total lack of distractions (hello, no WiFi)

All those things seem to bring people closer together. Now, if camping makes you break out in hives, that's okay. This exercise isn't about tents or bugs—it's about discovering what kinds of shared experiences strengthen your connection.

#### **Reflect & Discuss:**

- What made your best vacation so special?
- Are there common themes between your stories?
- What does your favorite vacation say about your values?
- How can you use those insights to plan your own bonding experiences as a couple—and eventually, as a family?

It's not about how far you go or how much you spend. It's about *what happens along the way*.

#### **Notes & Reflections:**

(Write about your favorite trip, your partner's, and ideas for future memory-making adventures.)

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## EXERCISE 2: TWO-WAY LEARNING

Let's talk about *respect*. Not the Aretha Franklin kind—though that's always welcome—but the kind that grows from truly valuing each other's differences.

One way we show respect is by acknowledging that our partner is smart... just maybe in a different way than we are.

There are many kinds of intelligence. For example: I was getting a car battery replaced the other day, and the girl installing it (yes—girl, and she was awesome) told me about her dad. He's book smart—can write you a manual on rebuilding an engine from scratch. But give him a wrench and... not so much. Meanwhile, she can actually *do* it.

Some people are socially brilliant. Others can solve logic problems in their sleep but go silent at parties. Some of us are creative; others are strategic. Some people fix things, some people organize chaos, some people can read a room like a book.

We all bring different skills to the table. Over time, your career, hobbies, and experiences give you insights your partner might not have. That's not a gap—it's a gift.

### Here's your exercise:

1. What's something *you* know a lot about that your partner doesn't?
2. What's something *they* know that you don't?
3. What are your unique gifts and abilities?

Now teach each other something. Could be anything—how to make a killer omelet, how to fix a leaky faucet, how to read a spreadsheet, how to spot a good deal at the thrift store.

### Take the time to listen and learn from each other.

When you do, your partner will feel seen, valued, and respected—and that's a powerful thing.

### Notes & Reflections:

(Write down what you learned from each other, and maybe something new you'd like to explore together.)



## EXERCISE 3: TRY ON ANOTHER PAIR OF SHOES

Let's pause here and talk empathy.

When conflict gets heated, most of us slip into “defend and attack” mode. We defend our choices, attack our partner's reasoning, and sometimes even roll our eyes for bonus drama points. But there's a better way.

Try on your spouse's shoes. (Not literally, unless you're the same size and into that kind of thing.)

Use this exercise to reflect:

### Ask yourself:

- *What's it like to be married to me?*
- *How do I come across when I'm frustrated?*
- *Would I want to be on the receiving end of my tone, my words, or my silence?*



### Then, discuss together:

1. What's something your partner might be feeling that you didn't notice before?
2. When was the last time you misunderstood each other—and how did you resolve it?
3. What are ways you can show more empathy moving forward?

When you stop and imagine how your spouse is experiencing the situation, something softens. That's when conflict turns into connection.

**Pro Tip:** Sometimes the best thing you can do in a tense moment isn't to be right—it's to be *kind*, *curious*, and a little quieter than usual.

Empathy is the secret ingredient that makes all the other marriage advice stick. Without it, even the best strategies can feel cold or mechanical.

So next time sparks fly, take a second to step out of your own head and into your spouse's world. You might be surprised what you learn—and how much faster you can get back to laughing, hugging, or deciding what's for dinner.

## Section Three: Learn from Others

### EXERCISE 1: RESEARCH 101 — GOOD AND BAD EXAMPLES

Sound too much like homework? Don't worry—you won't need a library card or footnotes. This kind of research is personal, practical, and surprisingly powerful. One of the best ways to prepare for marriage is to learn from others: what worked, what didn't, and what you can take with you.

#### **Step 1: Find a Great Example**

Each of you think of someone you know with a **truly successful marriage**—not just one that's lasted a long time, but one that feels solid, respectful, and warm. Then, on your own, go talk to one of them (the husband or wife). Ask them about their marriage—what works, what's been hard, and what they've learned.

*Bonus: Asking them will probably make their day.*

Come back together and compare notes. What did you learn?

#### **Step 2: Identify a Role Model**

Each of you describe someone you admire as a **great parent or partner**—someone who seems to be doing it right. Could be a mom, dad, husband, or wife. Now explain: what makes them great in your eyes?

#### **Step 3: Learn from the “Don'ts”**

Now (gently) talk about a **bad marriage** you've witnessed. What made it unhealthy? Where did it go wrong? And just as important—how will your relationship be different?

Sometimes we learn just as much from bad examples as we do from good ones.

#### **Want to go further?**

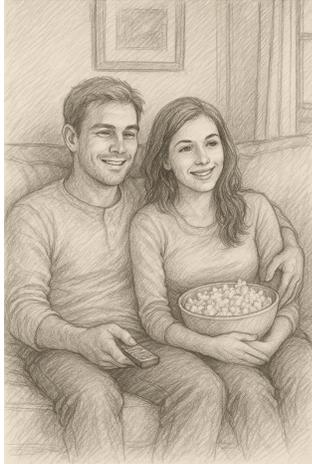
Many churches offer **mentoring programs** for engaged couples. They pair you with a couple in a strong marriage so you can learn from them directly—by talking, observing, and asking all the questions. If this sounds interesting, ask your church if they offer something like it—or know one that does.



#### **Notes & Reflections:**

(Use this space to jot down your interviews, insights, and anything that might help shape your own marriage.)

## EXERCISE 2: WATCH A MOVIE



Can you really count movie night as marriage prep? You bet. Overhearing—and overwatching—how other couples interact can teach us a ton about communication, conflict, and connection (plus, popcorn makes everything better).

**Assignment:** Rent and watch the movie *The Story of Us* starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Bruce Willis.

Heads up: this relationship gets rocky. Really rocky.

After you watch, talk it out:

- What went wrong in their marriage?
- How could things have gone differently?
- Which scenes hit home for you (in a good or not-so-good way)?

**Want more?** For a free extended discussion guide, go to [smartmarriages.com/story.guide.html](http://smartmarriages.com/story.guide.html)

 **Note:** This movie is Rated R. And yes, I've had people tell me they hated it. Consider yourself warned..

 **Watch the trailer:** <http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi33227033/>

 **Notes & Reflections:**

(Use this space to jot down what stood out to you—and what you hope to avoid or emulate in your own relationship.)

## EXERCISE 3: TAKE A FIELD TRIP

Remember field trips in school? You got to escape the classroom, eat questionable bagged lunches, and—miraculously—still learn something. Well, this one's kind of like that.

Your assignment? Go somewhere with lots of people—maybe a mall, coffee shop, or restaurant (she says, “That sounds like fun!”). Then just sit back and observe couples.



- How do they treat each other?
- Do they seem like they're in love?
- Can you really tell by watching?

Now, this isn't about judging strangers (let's not become mall paparazzi). It's about exploring your own beliefs and expectations.

What you notice in others will tell you a lot about what *you* value in a relationship. For example:

- Should couples show affection in public?
- Is eye contact a big deal?
- Does bickering make you uncomfortable—or does it seem playful?

### Reflect & Discuss:

- What did you notice?
- What did it reveal about your ideas on marriage?
- How do you want your relationship to feel—both in private and out in the world?



### Notes & Reflections:

(Use this space to jot down your observations and any insights they sparked.)

# Section 4: Digging Deeper

## EXERCISE 1: WHAT WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT NOW

Let's get organized. Below are 12 aspects of a relationship that often come up in marriage—some in smooth sailing, others during rough waters. This exercise helps you zero in on what you're already doing well and what could use some growth.

Each of you should:

1. Look through the list below.
2. Choose 3 areas that feel like strengths in your relationship right now. Mark those with an **"S."**
3. Choose 3 areas that feel like growth opportunities. Mark those with a **"G."**

Whoever goes first, keep your answers covered so your partner can't peek. Or better yet, print two copies and work independently.

Once you're both done, compare. Did you mark the same ones? Were there any surprises? Talk about what led you to choose what you did.

There's a list of questions at the end of this course to help guide discussion in each area you marked as a **G** for growth.

Even if you've talked through many of these topics during your relationship so far, this gives you a focused, organized way to home in on what matters *most* right now.

### Relationship Areas Checklist

Mark each line with **S** for Strength or **G** for Growth beside your name.

<b>Communication skills</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Resolving conflicts</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Expectations of marriage</b> ...	___	She	___	He
<b>Money matters</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Shared recreation activities</b> ....	___	She	___	He
<b>Children &amp; parenting views</b> ...	___	She	___	He
<b>Extended family issues</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Husband/wife roles</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Family backgrounds</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Religious views &amp; practices</b> ...	___	She	___	He
<b>Personality concerns</b> .....	___	She	___	He
<b>Sexual relationship issues</b> .....	___	She	___	He

 **Heads Up:** This can be a fun and helpful conversation. But if things get tense, remember these key communication principles:

- Let your partner be honest. You don't have to like what you hear—but reactions like anger, sarcasm, or shutting down will stop progress in its tracks.
- Listen. Really listen. Reflect back what you hear in your own words to show you understand.
- Keep your tone calm and respectful. Avoid raising your voice—even if things feel sensitive.
- Stay focused on the goal: strengthening your relationship. You're not adversaries—you're a team, working toward a better future together.



**Notes & Reflections:**

(Write about which areas you matched on, where you differed, and what conversations came out of it.)

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## EXERCISE 2: ASKING AND LISTENING



Husbands and wives both need to ask for what they want—and really listen when their partner does the same. Everyone has needs, and there's nothing wrong with wanting those needs met. The key is that it must go both ways. Marriage isn't a 50/50 deal—it's both partners giving 100%. This next exercise will help you practice both assertively asking for what you want and actively listening to what your partner values and needs.

### Instructions:

Separately, look over the list below. Rate each item from 1 to 3 in importance:

- **1 = less important**
- **3 = very important**

Print two copies and complete them privately. When both are finished, come together and discuss your 3s—and any others you'd like to talk about.

### ● Important:

- Listen carefully to your partner as they explain why an item is important.
- This isn't the time for selfish demands—be real and respectful.
- Be willing to compromise. That's how teamwork works.

### Ask and Listen

#### Ask and Listen

Spend most of your free time with me

Let me make my own decisions

Change a personal habit if it bothers me

Always tell me what you are thinking

Discuss with me before spending money

Join in with me in things I like to do

Go shopping with me

Have sex with me whenever I want

Kiss me every day

Show / don't show affection to me in public

You take care of birth control

Have no contact with former girl/boyfriends

I'd like to spend regular time with my parents

Both of us be involved in religious activities

Speak about me & to me with respect in public

Remember special days with presents

Call if you are running late

Clean up your own messes

Throw away old love letters

Have good personal hygiene

Talk to me face to face daily

Always tell me what's bothering you

Compliment me often

Keep the house clean

Keep yourself attractive

Be home in the evenings

Help with dinner

Make me feel better when I'm down

Take care of me when I'm sick

Support me in my dreams

Plan fun dates for us

Be nice to my family

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## EXERCISE 3: I FEEL LOVED WHEN...

It's important to keep your relationship positive and loving. This exercise helps you express how you feel cared for—so your partner isn't left guessing (or guessing wrong).

Each of you should complete the statement: **"I feel loved by you when you..."**

Write down 3–5 things your partner can do that make you feel loved. Once you're both done, share your list and talk about it. Explain if needed—but most importantly, *do the things on the list* and enjoy the results.



### ● Guidelines:

- Keep it positive. Not: "I feel loved when you don't nag me." Instead: "I feel loved when you remember to text me during the day."
- Keep it affordable. Not: "I feel loved when you buy me jewelry." Try: "I feel loved when you bring me a card" or "rub my back."
- Keep it frequent. Not once a year—aim for small, repeatable actions like a kiss goodbye or a daily compliment.

### His – I feel loved by you when you...

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### Hers – I feel loved by you when you...

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

"A diplomat is a man who always remembers a woman's birthday but never her age."

"Women like silent men. They think they are listening."

# EXERCISE 4: I LOVE YOU BECAUSE...

This is a meaningful way to wrap up your marriage preparation. It's a chance to express your heart in writing—and to create something worth revisiting again and again.

Each of you, take time to answer the prompts below. You can share them with each other now—or save them for later. We recommend sealing this page in an envelope and putting it away with your keepsakes. Open it on your anniversary or anytime you hit a rough patch in marriage.

Why? Because when we're in conflict, we tend to magnify the negative and forget the positive. This will remind you of all the reasons you said "yes."

### **I Love You Because...**

**I am marrying you because:**

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**The things I admire / like about you include:**

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**Our relationship is good right now because:**

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**My favorite "memory" of us right now is:**

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**We share these common values, beliefs, and goals in life:**

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 **Optional Tip:** Keep this page with your vows or anniversary letters—you'll be glad you did.

## EXERCISE 5: QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMITMENT

This section might feel a little heavy—but stick with it. Commitment is a major pillar in a strong marriage, and being honest about expectations can prevent future misunderstandings.

### Talk It Through

Here are some questions to spark deep, honest conversation:

1. Under what circumstances could we imagine getting a divorce?
2. How are we going to guard ourselves from sexual unfaithfulness?
3. What happens when my individual needs aren't the same as yours?
4. Are we getting married for the right reasons?
5. Do we need to fine-tune our approaches to handling problems & money?

### A Husband's Commitment

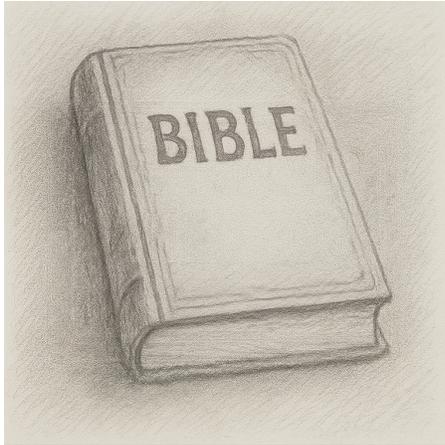
Here's what one husband wrote to his wife. Consider writing your own:

- There is no other woman I long to be with other than you.
- I will remain your life companion until one of our deaths dissolves our covenant.
- I will try to grow in my ability to tend to your needs as a human being, as a woman, and as a Christian.
- I will try to conduct myself in our marriage the way I imagine Christ would treat you if He were the one married to you.
- I will control my desires to look at & fantasize about being with other women.
- I will be your servant.
- I will place your well-being above my career and above my recreation.
- I will work to make you feel loved, since that is different from my loving you in the ways I prefer.
- I will view our relationship as a resource to us both.
- I will not perceive you as someone who exists to meet my needs but rather as someone who exists for me to serve.

 **Reflection:** Take a few minutes to write out your own commitment thoughts. You might even surprise yourself.

## Section 5: Special Areas of Interest

### EXERCISE 1: SPIRITUAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR MARRIAGE



You don't have to be a Bible scholar to draw inspiration from Scripture. These passages have stood the test of time and offer wisdom for married life—whether it's about communication, love, forgiveness, or just how to handle life's curveballs together.

**Instructions:** Read each of these Bible passages together and discuss what they mean for your marriage. If you'd like, jot down some notes or thoughts in the space provided.

Topic	Scripture References	Notes
Serving Each Other	Matthew 7:12; Philippians 2:1–8; 1 Corinthians 10:24	<hr/> <hr/>
Honesty	Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9	<hr/> <hr/>
Christ's Love as a Model	Ephesians 5:21–33	<hr/> <hr/>

Positive  
Communication

Ephesians 4:29

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Facing Life's  
Challenges

Romans 8:28; Jeremiah  
29:11

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God's Design  
for Marriage

Genesis 2:18–25

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Forgiveness

Ephesians 4:32; Matthew  
18:21–35

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What Love  
Really Means

1 Corinthians 13

---

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Sexual  
Intimacy

1 Corinthians 7:1–5

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Parenting

Ephesians 6:1–4

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Finances &  
Priorities

1 Timothy 6:10;  
Philippians 4:11–12;  
Matthew 6:33–34

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Conflict &  
Disagreements

James 4:1; Proverbs 15:1

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## EXERCISE 2: RESOURCES FOR BLENDED FAMILIES

Blending a family is a beautiful but often complex journey. A second marriage brings unique challenges, especially when kids, former spouses, and different family cultures are part of the picture.

Below are some discussion starters followed by trustworthy resources to dig deeper. If you're becoming a stepfamily, make the most of the excellent support available! (Update: please do some searching online to find current resources)

### Topics to Discuss:

#### 1. Concerns from past relationships:

- Is there any interference from a previous partner?
- Are there ongoing obligations like child support or alimony that cause tension?

#### 2. Setting up your new life together:

- Where will you live? Will it be a new place, or someone's existing home?
- Whose furnishings will stay? How will the home be decorated?

#### 3. Expected challenges:

- What do you each anticipate being the hardest part about blending your lives?

#### 4. Parenting roles and responsibilities:

- Who sets the rules for the kids?
- Who disciplines, and how?
- How do you balance meeting your kids' needs with nurturing your marriage?

 **Reflection:** Use the space below to jot down concerns, shared decisions, or things you'd like to explore together.

## EXERCISE 3: GETTING ALONG WITH IN-LAWS

Let's be honest: in-law relationships can be one of the biggest wildcards in marriage. And while fleeing to a cabin in the woods sounds tempting, it's probably not the best long-term solution. Here's a better approach.

**SET SOME GOALS:** Think intentionally about the kind of relationship you want with your extended family. Talk about it together and write it down.

### LOOKING AT DIFFERENCES

- Extended families often bring different expectations to the table.
- Talk about differences in generational views, city vs. country living, finances, spiritual beliefs, etc.
- How do you distinguish between *acceptance* and *agreement*?
- How will you bridge generational or value gaps?
- What does “unconditional love” mean to you?
- Who do you tend to clash with the most—and what are that person's strong points?
- Try re-framing: meddlesome = concerned, bossy = leadership potential.

### WHEN THERE'S TENSION

- How will you keep communication open during strained relationships?
- What's your strategy for staying calm when someone pushes your buttons?
- How will you handle unsolicited advice?
- What's your plan for navigating touchy subjects?
- Consider the common in-law complaints: being distant, inconsiderate, or uninterested. How can you counter these impressions positively?

### KEEPING THINGS POSITIVE

- What can you do to promote harmony during family gatherings?
- What fun activities could build stronger bonds with your extended family?

### BOUNDARIES

- How will you know when in-law issues are affecting your marriage—and what will you do?
- What are your family boundaries, and how will you communicate them?

- If a strong boundary needs to be set, who should do it—and when?

## Appendix: Discussion Questions for Couples

Below are questions you can use with the "What Do We Need to Talk About Now" exercise. Focus on areas each of you identify as growth areas and questions you believe need immediate discussion.

### Communication Skills

- The amount of time we have to talk
- Differences in our communication styles
- What I/you do when we have trouble communicating
- The topic hardest for me to discuss with you is:
- My/your ability to openly & fully express ourselves
- My/your tendency to use put-downs
- My/your lack of being a good listener
- My/your honesty
- My/your tendency to become quiet
- My/your tendency to interrupt
- My/your tendency to dominate the conversation
- My/your lack of interest in what I say
- What we talk about most of the time
- Our acceptance (or lack) of what one of us says
- Becoming negative in our communication
- Keeping secrets
- Need to find someone to help us communicate better

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### Resolving Conflicts

- Our general ability to resolve conflicts
- My/your tendency to give in too quickly
- My/your need to be right & get my/your way
- My/your tendency to say one thing, then do another
- My/your getting upset over trivial things
- My/your lack of taking issues seriously enough
- My/your not saying enough
- My/your talking too much & not listening
- My/your avoiding dealing with conflict
- My/your ability to share feelings/thoughts
- My/your ability to accept other's feelings/thoughts

- Our unresolved issue of:
  - An issue we have not discussed is:
  - My/your getting angry too much
  - My/your saying hurtful things
  - Need to find someone to help us resolve conflicts
  - Who has to have the last word
  - Will we ever discuss our conflicts with friends/family
  - Ever air differences in public / in front of our children
  - Our ability to compromise
- 

## **Expectations in Marriage**

- My/Your expectations of our marriage
  - Do you expect me to meet all your needs
  - What happens if unexpected problems come our way
  - What do we believe about commitment in marriage
  - Are you going to try to change me
  - How we view romantic love in a marriage
- 

## **Money Matters**

- Our expenses & can we pay the bills
  - Who will “keep the books”
  - When & for what will we borrow money
  - Are we going to keep a budget
  - Will we have credit cards & for what use
  - Current debts one or both of us have
  - Will both of us work now, or later
  - Move if one of us received an offer of better pay
  - Will we have separate banking accounts
  - Each other's spending habits
  - When do we need to consult with each other before spending money
  - How much of our income will we save
  - What we will save for
  - Would we ever lend money to a friend/family member
  - Would we ever borrow money from a friend/family
  - Will we shop for discounts
  - How much will we spend on fun stuff
  - How important should money be in our thinking & lives
-

## **Shared Recreational Activities**

- What we will do for fun
  - How much time you spend away from me
  - Our balance of work and play
  - Number & kind of activities we both can enjoy
  - This is something I'd like us to do together:
  - This is something I'd like to do with others:
  - I'm concerned about the money you spend on this activity:
- 

## **Children & Parenting Views**

- Birth control
  - When we will have children
  - How many children we will have & spacing
  - How we will nurture our children
  - How we will discipline our children
  - Who will discipline our children
  - Private, public, or home schools for our children
  - The role of the father
  - The role of the mother
  - If we discover we can't have children, what then
  - Value we'll place on spending time with our children
  - Value we'll place on showing affection to our children
  - Value we'll place on family mealtimes
  - Will one parent always be home with the children
  - How parenting will affect our marriage
- 

## **Extended Family Issues**

- How supportive our friends/family are of our marriage
- How your family feels about me
- How my family feels about you
- The time you spend with your family/friends
- Family members that nose into our business
- A family member/friend of yours that concerns me is:
- A family member/friend of yours that I really like is:
- How close/far away we'll live from our parents

- Will we accept/ask for financial help from our parents
  - How we will decide where to go for Christmas
  - How you speak to/treat my family
  - What happens if one of our parents needs special care
- 

## **Husband / Wife Roles**

- Will we both work outside the home
  - Our division of labor at home
  - How we will make major decisions
  - My/your role as father
  - My/your role as mother
  - Who will keep up with the money
  - Who will do the yard work
  - Who will keep the house clean
  - Who will help children with homework
  - Who will discipline the children
- 

## **Family Background Similarities/Differences**

- How much time our families spent together/apart
  - How our families express their love to each other
  - How decisions were made
  - How children were disciplined
  - Who disciplined the children
  - How conflicts were handled
  - Who did what (roles)
  - The stability of our parent's marriages
  - How holidays & birthdays were celebrated
  - What we did for vacations
  - What we did on weeknights
  - The time our parents spent together alone
  - The way children were taught about money
  - How crises were handled
  - The place of religious faith in my/your family
  - The person I like most in my/your family is:
  - The person I like least in my/your family is:
  - Family secrets
  - What we can learn from our families, good or bad
-

## Religious Values / Practices

- Our views on the importance of spiritual life
  - The role of our spiritual practices in our relationship
  - How our faith will help us deal with problems
  - How active we will be in a church
  - What I/you believe about:
  - A non-negotiable belief/practice for me is:
  - What we will teach our children about:
  - How our parents will feel about our choices in faith practices
  - Our devotional time together as a couple
  - Our devotional time together as a family
  - What the Bible teaches about marriage, husbands & wives
  - How much we will give to our church
  - What we will do about any religious differences <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gYaGKUq6-BaynaC-oyE6uBq0aE9Vfgo0jCec1RYOrcY/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.ki2jgeghm0z8>
  - Our difficulty in discussing religious matters
  - Our need to discuss our viewpoints with a minister
- 

## Personality Concerns

- My/your stubbornness
  - My/your temper
  - My/your honesty
  - My/your jealousy
  - My/your moodiness
  - My/your bad habits
  - My/your domineering behavior
  - My/your negativity
  - My/your \_\_\_\_\_
- 

## Sexual Relationship Issues

- Your expectations of me sexually
- What I need from you sexually
- Sexual acts I am not comfortable with
- Amount of affection in our relationship

- Our method of birth control
  - Previous sexual experiences and/or abuse
  - My comfort level in talking to you about sex
  - How often we will make love
  - Concerns or fears I have about sex
  - What sex means to our relationship
  - Male / female viewpoints in regards to sex
  - How I feel about my body/sexual attractiveness
  - Using sex as a punishment or reward
  - Should the man always initiate sex
  - Can we be affectionate without sex
- 

### **Other Discussion Points**

- **His:** These are some other things I'd like for us to discuss that were not listed anywhere above:
- **Hers:** These are some other things I'd like for us to discuss that were not listed anywhere above:

## Bonus Videos:

### LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE 1950s

Let's go retro for a minute.

A few years ago, I stumbled on some public domain 1950s marriage prep films. I did a little editing and uploaded them to YouTube. They're old-fashioned, unintentionally funny, and surprisingly insightful if you can get past the "gee whiz" lingo and stiff hairdos.

Meet Larry and Sue—two young lovebirds whose parents don't understand their desire to get married. So they seek advice from Mr. Hall, the counselor, who encourages them to explore their "psychological distance." Yep, that's a real thing.



Because, you know, marriage takes more than just the "boing!"

Laugh a little, then see if there's something you haven't talked about yet—like a point or two from Mr. Hall's classic Cupid's Checklist. What is outdated? What still holds true?

[▶ Watch Film #1](#)

[▶ Watch Film #2](#)

### CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE VIDEOS

You might not expect it, but watching a video or two can seriously strengthen your relationship. One groom highly recommended the following video series by Andy Stanley—he especially liked this one:

[▶ "What Happy Couples Know" by Andy Stanley](#)

Looking for something a little deeper and a lot more personal?

Check out Dave and Ann Wilson. Dave is the teaching pastor at a large community church outside Detroit. He and Ann have been married over 30 years and served as

chaplains to the Detroit Lions for 26 of those. Their style is personal, funny, and super honest—no fluff, just real-life insights.

Their message dives into:

- The “rocks” every strong marriage needs
- The *real* top need of most husbands (spoiler: it’s not what you think)
- The top need of most wives
- And a musical take on the stages of their marriage you won’t forget

You’ll also hear about their all-expenses-paid 25th anniversary trip—and what made it more meaningful than they expected.

 [Watch Dave and Ann Wilson on Vimeo](#)

Note: You may need to search their names on Vimeo to find the most current versions.

 Reflection: What messages or themes from these videos stuck with you? Did anything challenge your thinking or affirm it? Take a moment to jot a few thoughts down.

# HOW TO GET THE COURSE COMPLETION CERTIFICATE

This course is 100% free for all couples, anywhere. But if you're getting married in **Tennessee**, there's an extra perk: it can save you **\$60** on your marriage license.

Here's how it works:

Couples who complete **4 hours** of an approved marriage prep course within a year of their wedding can present a **notarized certificate** to the clerk and skip the \$60 state fee. That knocks your license cost down to about **\$40** instead of the usual \$100. Nice, right?

As a real, lifelong minister approved by the state of Tennessee, I can issue that certificate.

## If I'm officiating your wedding:

You get the certificate **free**—no strings attached.

**Again, ignore the details about payment below if I am officiating your wedding. The completion certificate is free. Just email me responses to the questions on the next page.**

## If I'm not officiating:

You can still use this course and receive the official **notarized certificate** from me for **\$20**.

## Here's How to Get It:

**Step One:** Complete at least **4 hours** of this course. Then, answer a few reflection questions listed below under "Verification Responses."

**Step Two:** Send a **\$20 payment** to me using one of the options provided.

**Step Three:** I'll **mail** you the original notarized certificate. (Email or copies won't work—Tennessee requires the real deal. So don't wait too long before your wedding!)

Certification of Completion Premarital Preparation Course		
<small>Tennessee Code Annotated §36-6-413(b)(2) provides that couples who complete premarital preparation courses shall be exempt from the \$60 fee otherwise imposed by that code section. The course must not be less than four (4) hours and completed no more than one year prior to the date of application for the license. Parties may attend separate classes. If they do, separate certificates must be filed.</small>		
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION		
<small>Every blank must be completed</small>		
APPLICANT 1	APPLICANT 2	
Name	Name	
Address	Address	
Course Attended		
COURSE PROVIDER INFORMATION		
<small>Every blank must be completed</small>		
Name	QUALIFICATIONS (or relevant training if representative of a religious institution) <b>Check one</b>	
Number of Hours Completed	<input type="checkbox"/> Psychologist (as defined under TCA, §63-11-203) <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical Social Worker (as defined under TCA, Title 63, Ch. 23, Part 1)	
Date Course Completed	<input type="checkbox"/> Licensed Marital and Family Therapist (as defined under TCA, §63-22-115) <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical Pastoral Therapist (as defined under TCA, Title 63, Ch. 22, Part 2)	
Address	<input type="checkbox"/> Professional Counselor (as defined under TCA, §63-22-104) <input type="checkbox"/> Psychological Examiner (as defined under TCA, §63-11-202)	
Provider's Phone Number	<input type="checkbox"/> Official Representative of a Religious Institution (recognized under TCA, §63-22-204) <input type="checkbox"/> Any other instructor approved for the judicial district for the county where license is issued	
<small>Tennessee does not certify approved providers or maintain a central list of providers. The names of professionals who meet the qualifications as noted above may be found at <a href="http://www2.state.tn.us/health/licensure/index.htm">www2.state.tn.us/health/licensure/index.htm</a> or in your local telephone directory. Inclusion on the website does not guarantee that such professional is willing to provide the premarital preparation course.</small>		
AFFIDAVIT		
I swear or affirm that the participant(s) named above attended the premarital preparation course for the number of hours and on the date indicated. I further certify that the instructor was qualified under the provisions of Tennessee Code Annotated §36-6-413(b)(2).		
Signature of Instructor or Provider	Date	License Number (if applicable)
Subscribed and sworn to before me, this _____ day of _____, 20____		SEAL
Notary Public:	Commission Expiration Date:	

## COURSE VERIFICATION RESPONSES

Copy & paste the following into an email and send to **ralph.griggs@gmail.com**:

### Required Information:

- Bride and Groom's Name:
- What we learned about us and/or marriage:
  - He Said:
  - She Said:
- What I learned about me:
  - He Said:
  - She Said:
- Number of hours completed (must be at least 4):
- Date course completed (must be within 1 year of wedding):
- Mailing address to receive the certificate:

### Optional Questions:

- Suggestions for improving this course:
- Something from the course we'd recommend to others:
- How this course helped us:
- Preferred payment method for \$20 certificate:

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Need a wedding officiant in the **Nashville area**? [Visit my website.](#)