

Before the Altar: Small Group Study Guide & Couples Workbook

12-Week Journey to Healthy Marriage

A Companion Resource for Engaged Couples

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INTRODUCTION: How to Use This Study Guide

Welcome!

Congratulations on your engagement and your commitment to building a healthy, Christ-centered marriage! This study guide is designed to accompany the book *Before the Altar: Pre-Marital Counseling for Co-Dependency* and help you engage with the material in community with other couples.

What This Study Provides

- **12 weekly sessions** corresponding to each chapter of the book
- **Individual reflection** work to complete before each session
- **A couple of exercises** to do together before the group meets
- **Group discussion questions** for shared learning
- **Weekly homework** to integrate concepts

- **Facilitator notes** for group leaders
- **Tracking tools** to measure growth
- **Prayer guides** for spiritual focus

Who Is This For?

Engaged Couples:

- Preparing for marriage
- Wanting community support
- Committed to doing hard work
- Seeking biblical foundation

Group Facilitators:

- Pastors or counselors leading pre-marital groups
- Mentor couples guiding engaged couples
- Church marriage ministry leaders
- Anyone facilitating pre-marital preparation

Study Formats

This guide works for multiple formats:

Small Group (4-6 couples):

- 12 weekly 90-minute sessions
- Mix of teaching, discussion, and prayer
- Builds community and accountability

Mentor Couple with One Engaged Couple:

- 12 weekly sessions
- More personalized attention

- Intimate mentoring relationship

Self-Guided Couple Study:

- Work through at your own pace
- Complete all exercises together
- Consider joining a group later

Time Commitment

Weekly:

- Individual reading & reflection: 1-2 hours
- Couple exercises: 1-2 hours
- Group session: 90 minutes
- **Total: 4-5 hours per week**

Over 12 weeks, this is a significant investment—but your marriage is worth it.

Materials Needed

- Copy of *Before the Altar* for each person
- This study guide for each couple
- Journal or notebook for personal reflection
- Bible
- Pen/highlighter

Ground Rules for Success

- ✓ **Do the reading before each session**
- ✓ **Complete exercises honestly**
- ✓ **Attend all sessions (or make up missed ones)**
- ✓ **Maintain confidentiality**
- ✓ **Be vulnerable and authentic**

- ✓ **Extend grace to yourself and others**
- ✓ **Stay curious, not judgmental**
- ✓ **Commit to the full 12 weeks**

GROUP GUIDELINES & COVENANT

Creating Safe Space

For this study to be transformative, your group must be a safe space where vulnerability is welcomed and confidentiality is sacred.

Group Covenant

We, the members of this pre-marital study group, commit to:

CONFIDENTIALITY

What's shared in the group stays in the group. No sharing others' stories with people outside the group, including friends, family, or social media.

Exception: If someone discloses abuse, suicidal ideation, or illegal activity, the facilitator may need to report it or get help.

RESPECT

- We will honor each other's stories and struggles
- We won't judge, criticize, or offer unsolicited advice
- We'll listen to understand, not to fix
- We'll respect different perspectives and experiences

PARTICIPATION

- We'll come prepared, having done the reading and exercises
- We'll engage actively in discussions
- We'll be honest about our struggles
- We'll also celebrate victories and growth

BOUNDARIES

- We'll arrive on time and stay for the full session
- We'll silence phones during group time
- We'll not dominate discussions
- We'll give everyone opportunity to share
- We'll respect when someone isn't ready to share

GRACE

- We'll extend grace when others stumble or miss
- We'll be patient with the process
- We'll avoid shame language
- We'll celebrate small steps of growth
- We'll remember we're all learning

COMMITMENT

- We'll attend all 12 sessions unless truly unavoidable
- We'll notify the group if we must miss
- We'll complete homework between sessions
- We'll stay engaged even when it's uncomfortable
- We'll see this through to the end

All group members sign:

Couple 1: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Couple 2: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Couple 3: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Couple 4: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Couple 5: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Couple 6: _____ & _____ Date: _____

Facilitator(s): _____ & _____ Date: _____

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Who Can Facilitate?

Ideal facilitators:

- Married couples with healthy marriages (5+ years recommended)
- Pastors or licensed counselors
- Couples who've worked through their own co-dependency issues
- Those with training in group facilitation
- People with wisdom, discernment, and grace

Facilitators should:

- Have read the book thoroughly
- Be willing to share vulnerably from their own marriage
- Maintain appropriate boundaries
- Know when issues need professional help
- Model healthy relationship dynamics

Preparation

Before the study begins:

- Read the entire book and this study guide
- Pray for each couple by name

- Prepare the meeting space
- Gather materials
- Create a group contact list
- Set clear expectations

Weekly preparation:

- Review the chapter and study guide section
- Complete the exercises yourself
- Pray for the upcoming session
- Prepare discussion questions
- Plan timing

Session Structure

Each 90-minute session follows this format:

0-10 minutes: Welcome & Opening

- Greeting and settling in
- Opening prayer
- Brief check-in

10-25 minutes: Teaching/Overview

- Facilitator highlights key concepts from the chapter
- Not a lecture—just overview and framing
- Connect to previous weeks

25-70 minutes: Discussion

- Small group discussion questions
- Mix of full group and couple-only discussions

- Balance between depth and time

70-85 minutes: Integration & Prayer

- Summarize key learnings
- Preview homework
- Group prayer time

85-90 minutes: Closing

- Encourage and bless
- Dismiss

Facilitation Tips

Creating Safety:

- Model vulnerability by sharing from your own marriage
- Thank people for sharing
- Redirect if someone shares inappropriately
- Protect confidentiality fiercely

Managing Discussion:

- Draw out quiet couples: "We haven't heard from you yet..."
- Redirect dominant speakers: "Thanks for sharing. Who else has thoughts?"
- Stay on topic: "That's interesting, but let's return to..."
- Manage time: "We need to move on, but we can talk more after"

Handling Difficult Moments:

- **Conflict between couples:** "Let's pause. Remember we're here to learn, not to be right."

- **Defensiveness:** "Notice what you're feeling. What's behind that reaction?"
- **Shame spirals:** "Remember grace. This is about growth, not condemnation."
- **Oversharing:** "Thank you for trusting us. Let's keep some details private and focus on the pattern."

Encouraging Application:

- Always connect discussion to practical action
- Ask: "What will you do differently this week?"
- Follow up on previous week's commitments
- Celebrate small wins

Red Flags Requiring Referral

Immediately refer to professional help if you observe:

- Any form of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, financial)
- Threats of harm to self or others
- Untreated serious mental illness
- Active addiction
- Severe trauma responses
- One partner completely unwilling to engage
- Patterns that feel dangerous or toxic

Your role is to facilitate growth, not to provide therapy. Know your limits.

Resources to Have Available

- List of local Christian counselors
- Domestic violence hotline information

- Suicide prevention resources
- Additional recommended books
- Contact info for your pastor/counseling director

Prayer Guide for Facilitators

Pray for:

- Each couple by name
- Wisdom in facilitation
- Holy Spirit's guidance
- Safety and vulnerability in the group
- Transformation and growth
- Protection from enemy attack on marriages
- Your own marriage as you lead

Self-Care for Facilitators

- Don't carry couples' burdens as your own
- Maintain your own boundaries
- Process difficult sessions with your co-facilitator or supervisor
- Remember: their growth is not your responsibility—it's God's and theirs
- Take breaks between cohorts if needed

WEEKLY SESSION FORMAT

Each weekly study follows this consistent format:

BEFORE THE SESSION

Individual Work (to complete privately)

- Read the assigned chapter
- Complete personal reflection questions
- Journal about your own patterns and family history

Couple Work (to complete together before group)

- Discuss couple reflection questions
- Complete assigned exercises from the book
- Pray together

Come Prepared

- Bring your book, study guide, and Bible
- Come ready to engage and be vulnerable
- Bring any questions that arose

DURING THE SESSION (90 minutes)

Welcome & Check-In (10 min)

- Gather and settle
- Opening prayer
- Quick check-in: "How has this week been?"

Teaching Overview (15 min)

- Facilitator highlights key concepts
- Overview of chapter themes
- Connection to previous weeks

Discussion (45 min)

- Full group discussion questions
- Couple-only discussions

- Sharing insights and struggles

Integration & Prayer (15 min)

- Summary of key learnings
- Preview next week's homework
- Group prayer

Closing (5 min)

- Encouragement
- Logistics
- Dismissal

AFTER THE SESSION

This Week's Practice

- Specific action steps to implement
- Skills to practice
- Patterns to notice

Next Week's Preparation

- Chapter to read
- Exercises to complete
- Questions to consider

THE 12 WEEKLY STUDIES

WEEK 1: Family Roots—Understanding Where We Come From

Chapter 1 of Before the Altar

THIS WEEK'S FOCUS

Understanding how family-of-origin patterns shape your relationship dynamics and beginning to identify generational patterns you want to break.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- Exodus 20:5-6 (breaking generational cycles)
- Psalm 68:6 (God sets the lonely in families)

BEFORE THE SESSION

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Complete these privately in your journal:

1. Family Inventory:

- Describe your family growing up in three words: _____
- What was the emotional climate of your home?
- How did your parents relate to each other?
- How did they relate to you?

2. Attachment Assessment:

- As a child, did you feel safe and secure? Why or why not?
- Were your needs generally met? Could you express emotions?
- What did you learn about love from your family?

3. Co-Dependency Roots:

- What role did you play in your family? (Hero, caretaker, peacekeeper, scapegoat, invisible one)
- Were you responsible for others' emotions or problems?
- Was love conditional or freely given?

4. Patterns to Examine:

- What patterns from your family do you want to keep?
- What patterns do you want to leave behind?
- What patterns are you afraid you're repeating?

5. Prayer: Write a prayer asking God to reveal family patterns and give you grace to break unhealthy cycles.

COUPLE WORK (Complete Together)

1. Complete the Family Genogram Exercise (from the book, Chapter 1)

- Create your genograms separately
- Share them with each other
- Discuss what you notice

2. Discuss:

- Where do you see similar patterns in our families?
- Where are our family cultures different?
- What concerns do you have about blending our family backgrounds?
- What excites you about creating our own family culture?

3. Identify:

- Three patterns we both want to break:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- Three strengths from both families we want to carry forward:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

DURING THE SESSION

OPENING (10 minutes)

Welcome & Prayer:

"Father, thank You for bringing us together for this journey. We invite You into this process of examining our family roots. Give us courage to be honest, grace to forgive, and wisdom to know what to keep and what to release. Help us to see clearly so we can build healthily. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Ice Breaker: Go around the circle. Share:

- Your names
- Your wedding date
- One word to describe how you feel about starting this study

TEACHING OVERVIEW (15 minutes)

Facilitator shares:

Key Concepts from Chapter 1:

1. **We all bring family patterns into marriage**

- You learned about relationships in your family of origin
- These patterns are mostly unconscious
- They'll show up in your marriage unless examined

2. Attachment styles shape relationship expectations

- Secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized
- These develop in early childhood
- They can be changed but require awareness

3. Co-dependency often starts in family systems

- You may have learned to rescue, fix, or people-please
- These behaviors felt like love but were actually survival strategies
- They don't serve you in adult relationships

4. Generational cycles can be broken

- Exodus 20:5-6 shows both the problem and the promise
- Awareness is the first step
- God's power can break any cycle

5. The goal: Leave and cleave

- Genesis 2:24 requires leaving before cleaving
- Emotionally and psychologically, not just physically
- Creating your own family culture while honoring parents

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (45 minutes)

ROUND 1: Full Group Discussion (15 min)

1. What surprised you most about examining your family of origin?

2. Did anyone identify co-dependent patterns that started in your family? What did you notice?

3. How does understanding attachment styles help you make sense of your relationship dynamics?

4. What gives you hope that you can break generational cycles?

Facilitator note: Keep this general. Don't let anyone share detailed family trauma—that's for couple work or individual therapy.

ROUND 2: Couple-Only Discussion (15 min)

Instructions: Turn to your partner. Discuss these questions together. We'll come back together in 15 minutes.

- 1. After creating our genograms and discussing our families, what patterns do we see that concern us?**
- 2. Where do we already see these patterns showing up in our relationship?**
- 3. What's one specific pattern we want to commit to breaking together?**
- 4. How can we support each other in differentiating from our families of origin?**

ROUND 3: Full Group Debrief (15 min)

Come back together.

- 1. Without sharing private details, what was it like to discuss family patterns with your partner?**
- 2. Did anyone identify a pattern you're committed to breaking? (Share if comfortable)**
- 3. What do you need from this group as you do this work?**
- 4. How can we pray for each other regarding family-of-origin issues?**

INTEGRATION & PRAYER (15 minutes)

Key Takeaways:

Facilitator summarizes:

- Family patterns are powerful but not determinative
- Awareness is the first step to freedom
- You can honor your parents while establishing healthy boundaries
- God's power breaks generational cycles
- You're creating a new family culture together

This Week's Practice:

1. **Have one conversation with your partner** about a family pattern you noticed this week
2. **Journal daily:** "Today I noticed this family pattern showing up: ___"
3. **Pray together** for wisdom and strength to break unhealthy cycles

Next Week's Preparation:

- Read Chapter 2: Recognizing the Co-Dependent Cycle
- Complete the Co-Dependency Pre-Marital Inventory
- Do the individual and couple reflection work

PRAYER TIME:

Group prayer format:

- Everyone shares one brief prayer request related to family-of-origin issues
- Go around the circle, each person praying for the person to their right

- Facilitator closes

Facilitator's closing prayer:

"Father, we thank You for the families we come from—both for what they gave us and for what they couldn't give. We ask for healing from family wounds, wisdom to see patterns clearly, and courage to build something different. Break the chains of generational dysfunction in each of these couples. Give them grace to honor their parents while also leaving and cleaving. We trust You to do what we cannot do. In Jesus' name, Amen."

CLOSING (5 minutes)

Encouragement:

"You've begun important work tonight. Examining family patterns is hard. Be gentle with yourselves and each other this week. Remember: awareness doesn't equal condemnation. You're not blaming your parents—you're taking responsibility for your own growth. Well done for showing up."

Logistics:

- Confirm next week's meeting time and location
- Exchange contact information if you haven't yet
- Remind about next week's reading and homework

PERSONAL TRACKING

MY GROWTH THIS WEEK

What I learned:

One pattern I identified:

One thing I'll do differently:

How I saw God working:

COUPLE CHECK-IN

How we're doing after Week 1: (Rate 1-10)

Communication: _____ Vulnerability: _____ Hope for our future: _____

One thing we're celebrating:

One thing we're working on:

WEEK 2: Recognizing the Co-Dependent Cycle

Chapter 2 of Before the Altar

THIS WEEK'S FOCUS

Identifying specific co-dependent patterns in your relationship and understanding the cycle that keeps them alive.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- Galatians 1:10 (people-pleasing vs. God-pleasing)
- Proverbs 29:25 (fear of man vs. trust in God)

BEFORE THE SESSION

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Complete the Co-Dependency Pre-Marital Inventory (from the book)

- Answer honestly, not how you want to score
- Note your scores in each section
- Don't share scores with partner yet—wait until you discuss together

2. Self-Assessment:

Rate yourself (1-10) on these tendencies:

Rescuing: ____ (1=never rescue, 10=constantly rescuing)

People-pleasing: ____ (1=assertive, 10=constantly abandoning self)

Control: ____ (1=respectful of autonomy, 10=micromanaging)

Avoidance: ____ (1=face conflict head-on, 10=avoid at all costs)

Emotional fusion: ____ (1=differentiated, 10=完全ly enmeshed)

3. Journal:

The co-dependent pattern I most identify with:

When this pattern shows up most:

What I'm afraid will happen if I stop this pattern:

What I want to do differently:

COUPLE WORK

1. Share Your Inventory Results:

- Take turns sharing your scores
- Listen without defensiveness
- Ask clarifying questions
- Notice where your scores differ and why

2. Discuss:

- What patterns do we both see in our relationship?
- Where do our co-dependent patterns interact? (One rescues/one is rescued, one pursues/one withdraws, etc.)
- How do these patterns hurt us?
- What would our relationship look like without these patterns?

3. Identify Your Cycle:

Our co-dependent cycle looks like this:

Step 1: When _____ happens (trigger)

Step 2: I respond by _____ (co-dependent behavior)

Step 3: You respond by _____

Step 4: Then we both feel _____

Step 5: And the real issue (_____) stays unaddressed

4. Make One Commitment:

This week, when we notice our cycle starting, we'll:

DURING THE SESSION

OPENING (10 minutes)

Check-In:

Go around the circle:

- How was your week?
- Did you notice any family-of-origin patterns showing up?
- How did the reading affect you?

Opening Prayer:

"Father, give us courage to see our co-dependent patterns clearly. Remove our defenses and help us to be honest. Show us where we're trying to control, rescue, or people-please instead of love healthily. Transform us by Your grace. Amen."

TEACHING OVERVIEW (15 minutes)

Key Concepts from Chapter 2:

1. Co-dependency is a relational system, not just individual behavior

- It's a dance that both partners participate in
- One person's pattern enables the other's
- Breaking it requires both people to change

2. Common patterns:

- **Rescuing:** Fixing, solving, taking over responsibilities
- **People-pleasing:** Abandoning self, saying yes when you mean no
- **Control:** Managing, micromanaging, anxiety-driven oversight
- **Avoidance:** Withdrawing, stonewalling, refusing to engage
- **Emotional fusion:** Can't distinguish your emotions from theirs
- **Giver/taker imbalance:** One consistently gives, other consistently receives

3. The cycle perpetuates because both get something from it

- Rescuer feels needed and valuable
- Rescued feels cared for and avoids responsibility
- People-pleaser avoids conflict and rejection
- Controller manages anxiety
- Each role meets a need—just not a healthy one

4. Fear drives co-dependency

- Fear of abandonment
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of conflict
- Fear of being alone

- Fear of inadequacy

5. Breaking the cycle requires:

- Awareness (you're getting this)
- Naming the pattern
- Addressing the underlying fear
- Changing behavior despite discomfort
- Extending grace when you slip

DISCUSSION (45 minutes)

ROUND 1: Full Group (15 min)

- 1. What co-dependent pattern did you most recognize in yourself?**
- 2. Be honest: What do you get out of your co-dependent pattern? (What need does it meet?)**
- 3. What are you most afraid will happen if you stop the pattern?**
- 4. Galatians 1:10 talks about people-pleasing. How does fear of man show up in your relationship?**

ROUND 2: Couple Discussion (15 min)

Discuss together:

- 1. Share your inventory scores with each other if you haven't yet. What do you notice?**
- 2. Can you identify your specific co-dependent cycle? Walk through it together.**
- 3. How do our patterns interact? (My rescuing enables your under-functioning, my pursuing triggers your withdrawal, etc.)**

4. If we broke these patterns, what would our relationship look like?

ROUND 3: Group Debrief (15 min)

- 1. What was it like to identify and name your cycle together?**
- 2. Did anyone have an "aha moment" about how your patterns interact?**
- 3. What's going to be hardest about changing these patterns?**
- 4. What gives you hope that change is possible?**

INTEGRATION & PRAYER (15 minutes)

Key Takeaways:

- Co-dependency is normal and common—you're not uniquely broken
- Awareness is huge—most couples never identify these patterns
- Both partners contribute to the cycle
- Change will be uncomfortable but worth it
- Grace for the process is essential

This Week's Practice:

1. Notice your cycle in action:

- When you catch yourself in your pattern, pause
- Say out loud: "I'm rescuing/people-pleasing/controlling right now"
- Naming it interrupts it

2. Try one new behavior:

- If you rescue: Let your partner handle their own problem
- If you people-please: Say what you really want

- If you control: Step back and let them do it their way
- If you avoid: Bring up one small issue

3. Pray together daily: "Lord, show us our patterns and give us strength to choose differently"

Prayer Requests:

- Each couple briefly shares one struggle with co-dependency
- Pray for each other

Facilitator closes:

"Father, thank You for the gift of awareness. Help these couples to see clearly without shame. Give them courage to break cycles and grace when they slip back. Transform their fear into trust. Their control into surrender. Their people-pleasing into honest love. Do what only You can do. Amen."

CLOSING

Encouragement:

"Recognizing these patterns is a gift—even though it doesn't always feel like it. You're doing hard work. This week, be gentle with yourselves. When you notice patterns, don't spiral into shame. Just notice, name it, and choose differently. Progress, not perfection."

Next week: Chapter 3 - The Myth of Completion

PERSONAL TRACKING

My dominant co-dependent pattern:

When it showed up this week:

One time I chose differently:

Progress I'm celebrating:

WEEKS 3-12: Session Outlines

Due to length, I'll provide abbreviated formats for weeks 3-12. Each follows the same structure but focuses on that week's chapter.

WEEK 3: The Myth of Completion

Focus: Understanding that marriage can't fix you or complete you—only Christ can.

Scripture: Colossians 2:9-10; Psalm 62:5-8

Key Concepts:

- "You complete me" is dangerous theology
- Wholeness comes from Christ, not your spouse
- What marriage can and cannot do
- Shifting from co-dependency to interdependence

Individual Work:

- Journal: "What am I hoping marriage will fix in me?"
- Assess: "How complete do I feel in Christ right now?" (1-10)
- List: Needs I'm bringing to my spouse that should go to God

Couple Work:

- Discuss expectations of what marriage will provide
- Identify unrealistic expectations
- Pray together about finding completion in Christ

Discussion Questions:

1. What surprised you about the list of "what marriage can't do"?
2. Where have you been looking to your partner to complete you?
3. How does being complete in Christ change how you approach marriage?
4. What needs to shift in your thinking before the wedding?

This Week's Practice:

- Spend 15 minutes daily alone with God (finding your completeness in Him)
- When you feel needy toward partner, pause and ask: "Is this something only God can provide?"
- Journal one way you're growing in completeness in Christ

WEEK 4: Healthy Expectations

Focus: Establishing realistic, biblical expectations for marriage.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-33

Key Concepts:

- Unspoken expectations are premeditated resentments
- Realistic vs. unrealistic expectations
- Mutual submission
- Interdependence vs. independence vs. co-dependency

Individual Work:

- Complete "Expectation Exchange" exercise (Chapter 4)
- List 5 expectations for daily life, emotional connection, roles, conflict, time together

Couple Work:

- Share and discuss expectations
- Identify misalignments
- Create shared expectations
- Sign your expectations agreement

Discussion Questions:

1. What expectation did you discover you had but never stated?
2. Where do your expectations differ significantly?
3. How did your family of origin shape your expectations?
4. What's one unrealistic expectation you're releasing?

This Week's Practice:

- When disappointed, ask: "Was my expectation realistic and communicated?"
- Have one conversation about an expectation that hasn't been discussed
- Pray for realistic hope, not magical thinking

WEEK 5: Boundaries—Love with Wisdom

Focus: Establishing healthy boundaries that protect the relationship.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23; Mark 1:35

Key Concepts:

- Boundaries are expressions of love, not rejection
- How to say "no" without guilt
- Privacy vs. secrecy
- Jesus modeled boundaries

Individual Work:

- Assess current boundaries (or lack thereof)
- Identify where boundaries are needed
- Journal about difficulty saying "no"

Couple Work:

- Create "Couple Boundary Covenant" (Chapter 5 exercise)
- Discuss boundaries with extended family
- Practice saying "no" to each other

Discussion Questions:

1. How were boundaries handled (or violated) in your family growing up?
2. Where do you struggle most with boundaries?
3. What's the difference between a boundary and a wall?
4. How will you support each other in maintaining boundaries?

This Week's Practice:

- Say "no" to one request (from anyone) without apologizing
- Establish one boundary with extended family
- When partner sets a boundary, respect it without pouting

WEEK 6: Finances and Control

Focus: Addressing how money reveals control and trust issues.

Scripture: Matthew 6:24; Proverbs 3:9-10

Key Concepts:

- Money isn't just about money—it's about power, control, trust
- Financial transparency is essential
- Budgeting as partnership
- Giving as worship

Individual Work:

- Complete Financial Transparency Checklist (Chapter 6)
- Full disclosure of all debt, income, assets
- Examine your financial fears and patterns

Couple Work:

- Share complete financial pictures
- Create first joint budget
- Discuss giving commitments
- Sign Financial Covenant

Discussion Questions:

1. What did you learn about money from your family?
2. What's hardest about financial transparency?
3. Where do you see control or co-dependency in financial decisions?
4. How will you handle money as a team?

This Week's Practice:

- No financial secrets—full transparency
- Discuss one purchase before making it
- Give your tithe together
- Pray over your budget

WEEK 7: In-Laws and Family Ties

Focus: Learning to leave and cleave while honoring parents.

Scripture: Genesis 2:24; Ruth 1:16-17

Key Concepts:

- Leave and cleave is biblical and essential
- Loyalty conflicts are normal but must be navigated
- Creating your own family culture
- Boundaries with extended family

Individual Work:

- Assess level of enmeshment with parents
- Identify needed boundaries
- Plan for leaving and cleaving

Couple Work:

- Complete "Our Family Vision" Planning Worksheet
- Discuss boundaries with both families
- Plan for holiday negotiations
- Create your family mission statement

Discussion Questions:

1. What will "leaving and cleaving" require of you specifically?
2. Where do you anticipate loyalty conflicts?
3. How will you handle in-law boundary violations?
4. What family culture are you creating together?

This Week's Practice:

- Have one conversation with parents about a boundary
- Make one decision together without parental input
- Discuss holiday plans for your first year of marriage

WEEK 8: Communication Without Control

Focus: Building honest, grace-filled communication.

Scripture: James 1:19-20; Ephesians 4:29

Key Concepts:

- Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger
- Listening without fixing
- Emotional regulation
- Non-defensive dialogue

Individual Work:

- Assess communication patterns
- Identify your triggers for defensiveness
- Practice emotional regulation techniques

Couple Work:

- Create "Time-Out" Conflict Plan
- Practice weekly check-ins
- Role-play listening without fixing

Discussion Questions:

1. What's your biggest communication weakness?
2. When do you default to control through communication?
3. How was conflict handled in your family?
4. What communication skill do you most need to develop?

This Week's Practice:

- Use "time-out" signal if you need one during conflict
- Practice empathic listening (just listen, don't fix)
- Have your first weekly check-in using the format from the book

WEEK 9: Conflict Without Rescuing

Focus: Learning to address conflict constructively.

Scripture: Romans 12:18; Matthew 18:15-17

Key Concepts:

- How rescuing prevents growth
- Repairing conflict authentically
- Fighting fair
- Conflict is opportunity for grace

Individual Work:

- Complete Conflict Style Assessment
- Identify rescuing patterns
- Journal about fear of conflict

Couple Work:

- Discuss conflict styles and how they interact
- Create Ground Rules for Conflict
- Practice repair after a disagreement

Discussion Questions:

1. What's your conflict style and how does it serve or hurt you?
2. Where do you rescue instead of allowing natural consequences?
3. What would change if you saw conflict as opportunity rather than threat?
4. How will you repair after fights?

This Week's Practice:

- When conflict arises, follow your ground rules
- Don't rescue—let partner experience consequences
- Practice genuine repair after any disagreement

WEEK 10: Cultivating Interdependence

Focus: Understanding the goal: two whole people, one covenant.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Key Concepts:

- Partnership vs. possession
- Individual growth within marriage
- Shared mission and purpose
- The "three strands" principle

Individual Work:

- Complete "Individual Growth Goals" (Chapter 10)
- Assess wholeness in various areas
- Plan for continued personal growth

Couple Work:

- Share growth goals
- Commit to supporting each other's growth
- Write "Shared Mission Statement"
- Plan for balancing individual and shared life

Discussion Questions:

1. What's the difference between interdependence and co-dependency?
2. How will you encourage your spouse's individual growth?
3. What's your shared mission as a couple?
4. How will you keep Christ as the third strand?

This Week's Practice:

- Spend one evening on individual pursuits
- Discuss one shared goal
- Pray together about your mission

WEEK 11: Grace for the Journey

Focus: Preparing for relapses and responding with grace.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:9; Philippians 1:6

Key Concepts:

- Relapses are normal, not failure
- How to confess and forgive
- Growing forward, not just confessing and repeating
- God's grace is sufficient

Individual Work:

- Reflect on growth so far
- Acknowledge areas of ongoing struggle
- Extend grace to yourself

Couple Work:

- Create "Grace & Growth Plan" (Chapter 11)
- Discuss how to handle relapses
- Commit to grace-filled accountability

Discussion Questions:

1. Where have you already seen old patterns return?
2. How have you handled it when you've slipped back?
3. What does grace look like practically in marriage?
4. When should you seek outside help?

This Week's Practice:

- When old patterns emerge, use your Grace & Growth Plan

- Confess quickly when you fail
- Extend grace when partner slips

WEEK 12: Before the Altar—Your Covenant

Focus: Sealing the journey with a spiritual and relational commitment.

Scripture: 1 John 4:18-19; Song of Solomon 8:7

Key Concepts:

- Covenant vs. contract
- Writing your covenant of healthy love
- Dedicating your marriage to God
- Marriage as discipleship journey

Individual Work:

- Reflect on the entire journey
- Write what you're committing to
- Prepare for covenant ceremony

Couple Work:

- Write your "Covenant of Healthy Love" (Chapter 12)
- Plan your private covenant sealing ceremony
- Pray the dedication prayer together

Final Session:

This session is different—it's a celebration and commitment ceremony.

Format:

Part 1: Testimony Time (30 min)

- Each couple shares (5 min each):
 - What we learned
 - How we've grown
 - What we're most grateful for

Part 2: Covenant Signing Ceremony (45 min)

- Each couple reads their covenant aloud to the group
- Group affirms each couple
- Facilitators pray blessing over each couple
- Couples sign covenants
- Exchange symbols if desired

Part 3: Celebration & Sending (15 min)

- Group blesses each couple
- Facilitator gives final charge
- Celebration (cake, sparkling cider, etc.)

Facilitator's Final Charge:

"You've done sacred work these 12 weeks. You've examined painful patterns, established boundaries, made commitments, and grown. You're not perfect—and you never will be. But you're prepared. You've built a foundation of awareness, tools, and grace that will serve you for decades.

Now you go to the altar—not as perfect people, but as prepared people. Not as those who've arrived, but as those committed to the journey. Not as co-dependent individuals, but as interdependent partners rooted in Christ.

Remember: - Your covenant when feelings fade - Your community when you struggle - Your God when you're weak - Grace for every failure - Hope for every challenge

You've learned that co-dependency masquerades as love. That boundaries are expressions of love. That interdependence is the goal. That marriage is discipleship. That grace is sufficient.

Now go build marriages that glorify God, bless each other, and show the world what covenant love looks like.

We're proud of you. We're praying for you. We're believing God for your flourishing.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May He turn His face toward you and give you peace—today and all the days of your marriage.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

Group Prayer:

- Facilitators lay hands on each couple and pray blessing
- Group prays together for all marriages
- Couples pray the dedication prayer from Chapter 12

Celebration:

- Share a meal or dessert
- Exchange contact information for continued friendship
- Take photos
- Celebrate this accomplishment

POST-STUDY RESOURCES

After the Study Ends

Stay Connected:

- Consider meeting quarterly for reunion check-ins
- Create a group text or messaging channel
- Plan an annual reunion

Continue Growing:

- Schedule annual marriage check-ups with a counselor
- Return to your covenant annually
- Re-read chapters as needed
- Stay in community

Give Back:

- Consider facilitating a future group
- Mentor newly engaged couples
- Share your story with others

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Tracking Your Progress

12-WEEK GROWTH ASSESSMENT

Use this tool at the beginning and end of the study to measure growth.

Rate each statement (1-10): 1 = Not true at all, 10 = Completely true

BEGINNING (Week 1):

Co-Dependency Awareness: ___ I understand what co-dependency is ___ I can identify my co-dependent patterns ___ I understand how my family shaped these patterns ___ I know the difference between interdependence and co-dependency

Boundaries: ___ I can set boundaries without guilt ___ I respect my partner's boundaries ___ I know the difference between privacy and secrecy ___ I'm comfortable saying "no"

Communication: ___ I communicate honestly and directly ___ I listen without fixing ___ I can regulate my emotions during conflict ___ I repair well after disagreements

Individual Wholeness: ___ I'm complete in Christ, not in my relationship ___ I maintain individual identity within the relationship ___ I pursue personal growth ___ I have healthy relationships outside my partnership

Relational Health: ___ We address conflict constructively ___ We have realistic expectations ___ We practice mutual submission ___ We extend grace to each other

END (Week 12):

[Rate the same statements again. Compare scores to see growth.]

APPENDIX B: Weekly Check-In Template

Use this format for your weekly check-ins throughout engagement and marriage.

Date: _____

APPRECIATIONS: Partner 1: I appreciated when you... Partner 2: I appreciated when you...

STATE OF THE UNION: How are we doing? (1-10): ___

What's going well: What's challenging:

ISSUES TO ADDRESS: Issue 1: Resolution:

Issue 2: Resolution:

THIS WEEK: Goals: Date night planned: Prayer requests:

APPENDIX C: Red Flag Assessment

If you're experiencing any of these, seek professional help immediately:

DANGER SIGNS: Physical violence or threats Emotional or verbal abuse
 Sexual coercion Financial abuse or control Isolation from friends/family
 Extreme jealousy or possessiveness Destruction of property Substance abuse
 Untreated mental illness Refusal to work on issues Pattern of lying or deception Any form of abuse

If you checked any boxes:

- Talk to your pastor or counselor immediately
- Consider delaying the wedding
- Get individual therapy
- Don't minimize or excuse
- Your safety matters

National Resources:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
- RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

APPENDIX D: Resource List

Recommended Reading:

- *Boundaries in Marriage* by Cloud & Townsend
- *The Meaning of Marriage* by Timothy Keller
- *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas

- *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie
- *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Pete Scazzero

For Finding Counselors:

- American Association of Christian Counselors: www.aacc.net
- Psychology Today Therapist Finder
- Focus on the Family Counseling Services
- Your church counseling ministry

For Continued Growth:

- Marriage conferences (attend annually)
- Marriage retreats
- Couples small groups
- Mentoring relationships

APPENDIX E: Facilitator Resources

Training for Facilitators:

- Prepare, Enrich certification
- Gottman Method training
- Christian counseling basics
- Group facilitation skills

Difficult Situations:

- When to refer out
- How to handle abuse disclosure
- Managing conflict in group

- Maintaining confidentiality
- Setting appropriate boundaries

Self-Care for Facilitators:

- Don't take couples' issues home
- Process with co-facilitator
- Maintain your own boundaries
- Pray for protection
- Take breaks between cohorts

APPENDIX F: Certificate of Completion

[Create a simple certificate that couples receive after completing all 12 weeks]

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

This certifies that

[Couple Names]

Have successfully completed the

Before the Altar

12-Week Pre-Marital Study

Having examined family-of-origin patterns, identified co-dependent behaviors, established healthy boundaries, developed communication skills, and committed to building a marriage of interdependence rooted in Christ.

May your marriage bring glory to God and blessing to each other.

Facilitator Signature: _____

Date: _____

"Two are better than one... A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." - Ecclesiastes 4:9, 12

CONCLUSION

A Word to Couples Beginning This Journey

You're about to invest 12 weeks in preparing for marriage in a way most couples never do. This is time well spent. The work may be hard—examining family patterns, identifying co-dependency, establishing boundaries, having difficult conversations. But it's infinitely easier to do this work now than to untangle these patterns years into marriage.

Remember:

- Progress, not perfection
- Grace for the journey
- Growth happens in community
- God's power makes transformation possible
- Your marriage is worth this investment

We're believing for you:

- Marriages free from co-dependency
- Partnerships rooted in interdependence
- Love that's covenant, not contract
- Homes marked by grace and truth
- Unions that glorify God

A Word to Facilitators

Thank you for investing in these couples. You're doing kingdom work—establishing healthy marriages that will impact generations. Your vulnerability, wisdom, and guidance matter more than you know.

May God bless you as you lead.

May He give you:

- Wisdom for every session
- Discernment for every situation
- Grace for every challenge
- Joy in seeing couples grow
- Protection for your own marriage

You're making a difference.

FINAL PRAYER

Father,

We dedicate this study guide to You. We pray for every couple who will use it. Do in them what only You can do. Open their eyes to patterns they can't see. Give them courage to change. Flood them with grace for the journey.

Bless every facilitator who leads these studies. Give them wisdom, discernment, and Your heart for these couples. Protect their marriages as they serve.

May the marriages that come from this work be testimonies to Your covenant love. May they glorify You, bless each other, and show the world what You intended marriage to be.

We trust You with every couple, every conversation, every moment of growth.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Now go build marriages that bring glory to God.

THE END

"Love is patient, love is kind... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." — 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7-8