

Week 8

Comparison Trap

For we would never dare to compare ourselves with people who have based their worth on self-commendation. They check themselves against and compare themselves with one another. It just shows that they don't have any sense!

—2 Corinthians 10:12

I love a night out with my girlfriends. I love catching up and laughing together. I especially love when my friends express adoration for their husbands. But every now and then, I admit, I'll hear a friend bragging about her husband and think, *My husband never does that*. If a friend's husband surprised her with a bouquet of flowers or a weekend getaway, of course I'm happy for her, but it's hard not to wish I had more of that in my marriage.

I wonder if my own husband ever feels that way. We're in a supper club with five other families, and all the wives in the group are fantastic at coming up with delicious meals. It's a running joke that all I can do is make spaghetti, order pizza, or cut fruit—that's

my skill level. When I watch my husband truly enjoy a meal made by one of these women, I wonder if he wishes he had what their husbands have: a wife who likes to cook and is really good at it.

Whether we're comparing our spouses, our homes, our children, or ourselves, when we compare our lives to others', we're falling into a self-laid trap. Theodore Roosevelt is attributed with a saying that I wholeheartedly believe: "Comparison is the thief of joy." The danger in comparing is that we can begin to believe we're entitled to something we don't have. The Bible says that comparing ourselves to each other is foolish. It's a distraction; we get focused on each other instead of on God and all that he has done for us. We can't be both jealous and grateful at the same time.

Maybe you wish your husband were more handy around the house. Maybe you wish your wife were waiting for you at the end of the day with a hot and hearty meal made from scratch. Maybe you wish your husband of little words would write you poems to express his love. But since he's not Shakespeare the Handyman, and she's not the Pioneer Woman, you might be overlooking the gifts God has given you in your spouse. You might be dismissing who that person is and how they already love you.

When you find yourself with that twinge of jealousy, when you start to wish you had what you believe someone else has in their marriage, here are a few things you can do:

- 1 Celebrate their joy!** One of the best ways out of the comparison trap is to get excited for other people and encourage them. Compliment your friend. Reinforce how loved she is by letting her know how wonderful it is that her husband surprises her with love notes around the

house. Hearing yourself say such complimentary things may just turn your own attitude from irritated to joyful.

- 2 Play your own highlight reel.** Keep in mind that, most of the time, you're seeing only the "best-of clips" from your friends' life stories. This is especially true if you're comparing your real life to the lives you see on social media. Believe me, others' lives are not always as good as they appear. So instead of focusing on what they have that you don't, remember what you do have. Find something to brag about in your own partner. Remember when she picked up your favorite pint of ice cream just because? Or the other night when he offered to clean up after dinner and how loved you felt? Then go one step further and compliment your spouse verbally.
- 3 Check yourself.** If you feel like your spouse may be lacking in some way, it's possible they're wishing for something more from you, too. So instead of comparing them to someone else, ask yourself if there are areas in which you can improve your own attitude and behavior. Maybe your wife wishes you'd give her an unsolicited back rub once in a while, no strings attached. Maybe your husband would love some company on his morning run, even though you'd rather stay in your warm bed a few minutes longer. Bring your best to your marriage, and you won't have time to think about someone else's.

Nobody's marriage is perfect all the time. Comparison will only ever serve to blind you from the goodness in your own life and, as the saying goes, steal your joy.

For Discussion:

- 1 Examine the accounts you're following on social media. Unfollow the accounts that consistently make you feel jealous, insecure, or unsatisfied with what you have. What we fill our minds with has a profound effect on how we feel about our own lives.
- 2 With your spouse, make a list of all of the things you love about your life. Take turns naming things you're grateful for.
- 3 Pray together, repent from any areas of jealousy and envy in your life, and thank God for the gift he's given you in each other.

Week 9

Feed the Good Stuff

Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with beauty and truth. Meditate on whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy.

—Philippians 4:8

Feed the good stuff. Starve the bad stuff.

In marriage, we have to be purposeful about noticing, remembering, and appreciating the good stuff our partners bring into our lives. When we're in a regular practice of noticing the positive, it becomes easier to overlook and forgive the negative. The reason is that our brains work best with patterns. Your brain likes to connect similar thoughts into a story it can remember and apply to your life in general. When you focus on something positive, something you appreciate about your partner, your brain searches for more positive things to attach to that first thought.

Likewise, if you focus on something negative, your brain begins to bring up more negative thoughts to build that story. If I focus on something annoying that my husband does—like leaving hair clippings in the sink after he shaves—and let myself get irritated, the next thing I know I'm looking at his toothpaste splatters all over the mirror and the water all over the counter and his wet towel bunched up on the floor, and now I'm sure he's the dirtiest, most inconsiderate person ever. He's gross and I'm annoyed, and when he walks into the room, he'll be greeted by a wife who's ready to criticize him for things he didn't even know he did wrong.

This happens to all of us, but it doesn't have to. As famous relationship researcher Dr. John Gottman says in his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*,

Fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance. Although happily married couples may feel driven to distraction at times by their partner's personality flaws, they still feel that the person they married is worthy of honor and respect. . . . If fondness and admiration are completely missing, reviving the relationship is impossible.

Did you catch that? Without fondness and admiration, Gottman says, it's easy to lose honor and respect, without which your marriage doesn't stand a chance. He also acknowledges that it's natural to get irritated with each other. Can we honor and respect people we're always frustrated with? I don't think we can. So what can we do to keep our marriages strong even when we're

irritated? We must practice feeding the good stuff. When you feed the good stuff, when you practice noticing and talking about the positive things, you automatically starve the bad stuff in your marriage. Focusing on good things makes it harder for your brain to hold onto the bad things.

Focusing on and feeding the good stuff is a habit—a discipline, a daily practice—that doesn’t always come naturally. This is why I think Paul uses the Greek word *logizesthe*—translated as “meditate,” “think about,” or “fill your minds”—in the book of Philippians. Paul compels us to focus on positive thinking as if it’s a choice, because in many ways, it is. Just because a negative or critical thought enters your mind, doesn’t mean you should allow it to take over. If you practice, you can reflexively reject those criticisms by focusing on something good instead, enabling you to “put on your new self, modeled after the very likeness of God: truthful, righteous, and holy” (Ephesians 4:24).

Feeding the good stuff starves the bad stuff. Making a conscious effort to focus on the positive decreases your propensity to notice the negative. It’s the little ways we speak and act toward each other every day that keep our marriages warm and inviting.

For Discussion:

- 1 Share with each other some of your favorite memories from when you were first dating. Notice how you feel about each other as you talk about your early days.
- 2 It’s easy to get irritated about the little things that happen every day. Can you think of a positive way to look at, or talk about, something that bothered you recently?

- 3 Are you more prone to criticize aloud or stew about your criticisms silently? Does this idea of “feeding the good stuff” change that for you? If so, how?
- 4 Pray. Ask God to renew your mind and to help you focus on those things that are pure and lovely and good. Acknowledge the goodness God has put in your spouse and thank him for each other.

Week 10

Love Is Not Like Chess

Be humble. Be gentle. Be patient.

Tolerate one another in an atmosphere thick with love.

Make every effort to preserve the unity the Spirit

has already created, with peace binding you together.

—Ephesians 4:2–3

Before we were dating, Tony and I used to meet with some friends at a neighborhood bar called Piper's Creek. Piper's was a dimly lit pub with a few pool tables, some dartboards, and one bartender. The outer walls were lined with bookshelves and all sorts of old board games. Back then, though we weren't yet dating, we definitely *liked* each other. You know, "liked" in the kind of way that makes you try to say and do interesting, cool, and attractive things around each other.

One time, as we sat at one of the tables at Piper's, Tony asked if I'd like to play chess. "Sure," I said. "I'd love to!" I was

embarrassingly enthusiastic, but who wouldn't want to play chess with someone they had a crush on? It's a game that takes a long time and involves only two players.

He pulled out the board and started to set up the pieces. I watched him and set my pieces up in the exact same way. He made his first move, and I thought it was a good one, so I made the exact same move. He made a few more moves, and each time I mirrored exactly what he did.

"You don't know how to play, do you?" he said.

"Well, I know the horse guy can take a left," I replied. "I know the pointy guy can go diagonal. And, yep, that's all I know about chess."

We laughed, and he started to teach me, but to this day I have no idea how to play chess, nor do I have any real desire to learn.

Tony and I still love playing games together, but if you're at a table playing with us, you'll quickly notice that we approach games very differently. I'm the type to play my hand, figure out my strategy at the start of the game, and move along at a relatively slow pace. Tony, on the other hand, is the card-counting, facial-expression-reading, block-your-next-move-just-because-he-can type of player. I play for fun, and he plays to win (which he claims is more fun).

Over the years, it's become clear that we approach just about everything in life differently, especially conflict. He likes to get it out on the table all at once. I like to wait until my thoughts are fully formed as reasonably as possible and be prepared for any contrary arguments before I broach an issue. In my mind, I'm being considerate by not lashing out at my husband. But sometimes, to Tony, it looks like I've shut him out.

Sometimes I want to play my frustrations out like a game of chess. I want to hold my anger and resentment close and watch to see if he'll figure out what he did wrong. Sometimes, when I'm hurt, I don't want to work with him on some sort of solution. I want, instead, to protect myself from him. I start thinking of him as an adversary and doing things for me instead of for us. But even as I'm playing all of this out in my mind, a conflicting phrase occurs to me over and over again: "We're on the same team. We're on the same team."

"Same team" is a phrase we use to remind ourselves that we're not married to an enemy whom we need to fight against. In a game where you're on the same team, you need to work together so that your team wins. If you play against your own team, you lose! In the case of marriage, we feel like we're not on the same team when we fail to listen to each other, and fail to really try to understand each other. If we do what comes naturally, just trying to be right and get our own way, we're playing the game as opponents. We need to, instead, come up with ways to listen and to try to understand each other, so that we can have a "same-team mind-set."

How about you? Are you and your spouse playing out your arguments as opponents, or are you attempting to be on the same team? Are you working hard to make your point, or are you working hard to have unity? Are you defending and protecting yourself, or are you defending and protecting your teammate and your marriage?

Once you get married, your role in the story of your life shifts entirely from being the star player to being a member of a team. The next time you go head-to-head with your partner, look him or her in the eye and remind each other that you're on the same team.

Think Like a Team

In marriage, we need to treat each other as teammates, not as opponents.

INDIVIDUAL/OPPONENT MIND-SET	SAME-TEAM MIND-SET
I am right, and I need to win this argument.	We need to understand each other better.
My spouse needs to parent the kids more like I do.	We want our kids to feel secure, which comes from us being consistent.
I'm putting my foot down on this one.	I feel strongly, but I'm willing to work on this until we can reach a solution.
I know this might be extravagant, but I deserve it, so I'm buying it.	I'll run big purchases by my spouse first to make sure we're on the same page. I'm willing to hear "No" or "Not right now."
"You never do anything around here!"	"Honey, I feel overwhelmed. Would you please help me with ____?"
Her tone is so disrespectful.	We're both feeling heated right now. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. We could both probably use some time to cool down.
She needs to say she's sorry before I'll talk to her again.	Blaming isn't going to bring us any closer. The relationship is the most important thing.
Maybe I'll cool down, but he's not "getting any" tonight.	Withholding sex is manipulative and passive-aggressive. If I'm not ready to be intimate with him, I need to be honest about that.
This fight isn't going anywhere, but I won't be the one who gives in first.	This fight isn't going anywhere, so maybe I should attempt to make repairs.
We're so different. We'll never see eye to eye on this.	I don't see it the way he does right now, but I'm willing to let this one go, as I see he's passionate about it.

For Discussion:

- 1 Look at the “Think Like a Team” chart. What are the main differences you see between the individual/opponent mind-set and the same-team mind-set?
- 2 When it comes to fights and arguments, do you tend to want to get all your thoughts and feelings out at one time or to keep your thoughts to yourself for a while? What patterns have you noticed in your arguments?
- 3 In the book of Ephesians, Paul urges believers to be humble, gentle, and patient. How do you think this posture promotes unity?
- 4 Pray. Thank God for giving us a spirit of unity and ask him to show you where you have an individual/opponent mind-set. Ask God to give you peace and clarity as you pursue humility and patience with one another this week.