JM Jason Mayfield

SERMON OUTLINE FOR PASTORS

WINNING IN MARRIAGE

Spouse Aware, Space Aware, Self-Aware and Jesus Aware

> Most marriage trouble does not come from the big, obvious sins but from the small things we have never paid attention to. Wake up and become aware: of your spouse, of your spaces, of yourself, and above all of who you are in Christ.

MAIN TEXT
Ephesians 5:6-17

SERIES
Stand-alone message

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BY
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AT A GLANCE

THE MESSAGE

1. Ephesians 5:6-17 tells you to awake, look carefully, be wise and discern the will of the Lord. That is the marriage instruction to work with, not the submission verses people throw at each other.
2. The overt problems, screaming, name calling, embarrassing each other in public, are the easy ones. Most marriage trouble comes from the small personality idiosyncrasies between two people.
3. Awareness one: become spouse aware. Observe how your spouse operates, learn their love language and personality, and set reasonable expectations about when and how you can draw on them.
4. Being spouse aware is self-serving, not self-sacrificing, because he who loves his wife loves himself. Whatever you invest in your spouse is what you draw a return on.
5. Awareness two: become space aware. Home, work, church, in front of the kids and online are different spaces, and the online space in particular is where people damage their marriage in public.
6. Everybody has an elephant in the room. The elephant is not leaving, but naming it and telling your spouse where you are house trains it.
7. Awareness three: self-awareness, which produces self-discipline. Without it you create a moving target of triggers your spouse cannot anticipate and landmines they keep stepping on.
8. If you can define it, you can defeat it. Naming what you carry lets you self-regulate first and then let your spouse help carry it.
9. You do not have to be who you have been. 2 Corinthians 5:17 means the patterns you grew up with are not your ceiling.
10. The highest level is being Jesus aware. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says you behold the glory of the Lord as in a mirror and are transformed, and James 1 says the person who looks and walks away forgets what he looks like.
11. Transformation comes from consistency, not intensity. Short dramatic bursts of spirituality every few months change nothing.

WATCH IT PREACHED

youtu.be/OK9XvFbCgaU

READ THE ARTICLE

jasonmayfield.com/messages/winning-in-marriage

PREACHING NOTES

Before You Preach

This is a stand-alone, practical message on marriage. Tell the church plainly that you are not an expert and that your marriage is not perfect. The authority of the message is the Word, not your track record.

It deliberately sets aside the submission passage (Ephesians 5:22-33) and builds on a few verses earlier, where Paul says to wake up, look carefully and understand the will of the Lord. Say why in a sentence or two and move on; this is not the day for a household-codes lecture.

The message runs on one word, **awake**, which becomes **awareness**: spouse aware, space aware, self-aware, and finally Jesus aware. Keep the humor light and the stories honest. Land the close on identity in Christ, not on technique.

Introduction

I believe the Holy Spirit told me to preach this message: winning in marriage. Ashleigh and I are not experts in marriage, and we do not have a perfect marriage. There are moments we get after each other and say or do the wrong thing. But over the years people have reached out and asked for help, and we have realized we may not deal with some of the things other couples deal with. If that is true, this will help you. If you are doing better than we are, it will still help you, because you have the Holy Ghost.

Pastor Jason cited research finding that regular church attenders are about 50% less likely to divorce than unbelievers and than people who call themselves Christians but do not regularly attend church, and that the non-attending group trends slightly higher than unbelievers. So if you are driving 110 miles an hour toward divorce, here is the first piece of good news: start coming back to church week after week.

But not getting divorced is a pretty low goal.

The goal is not to not get divorced. The goal is to be satisfied in your marriage.

SET ASIDE THE USUAL TEXT

Ephesians 5 is the chapter that says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). We are not going to work from that part of the chapter this morning.

In over 20 years of ministry, in conversation after conversation with couples in trouble, I have never met anyone who was hard-lining those instructions at their spouse and succeeding in marriage. When it gets tossed across the room, it is almost always a power struggle. Read against the household language of the Greek and Roman world, Paul is not enforcing that culture; he is disrupting it. But there is a better portion of Ephesians 5 for your marriage, and it is just a handful of verses above it.

THE BETTER TEXT

> EPHESIANS 5:6-17 ESV
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> [6] Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. [7] Therefore do not become partners with them; [8] for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light [9] (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), [10] and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. [11] Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. [12] For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. [13] But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, [14] for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." [15] Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. [17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

There is some easy stuff in marriage. If you are screaming at each other every day, calling each other names, embarrassing each other in public and being mean to one another, stop. You do not need to turn to the book of Hebrews to figure that out.

Illustration: the living room chair. I remember the first fight between my mom and dad that I can recall. My dad flipped over a living room chair. Don't do that stuff. That part is easy.

But most issues in a marriage do not come from things that are overt. They come from the idiosyncrasies between two people, the little personality quirks, and figuring those out is what makes it work. The verse tells us how: "Awake, O sleeper" (Ephesians 5:14). "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise" (Ephesians 5:15). "Understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

You have to get your mind on what is going on with you and your spouse, wrap your brain around it, and do some of the work. Learning to hear from God takes years, and some of you do not have years. So here are some things that can help you right away. Take them home, and you may have a significantly better marriage by spring.

Awake means awareness. Here are three areas of awareness that will take your marriage to a whole new level, and then a fourth that takes it higher still.

1. Become Spouse Aware

Some would say paying attention to your spouse is self-sacrificing. After all, the Bible says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). But three verses later Paul says, "He who loves his wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:28).

Being spouse aware is not self-sacrificing. It is self-serving.

If you are honest, you want a better marriage. No matter how good it is, everybody wants a better marriage. There is no "I" in marriage; there are two of you. But it is not selfish to say "I want a better marriage." It is honest. Too many of us sit under a message waiting for the preacher to put the hammer down on how the

house is supposed to run, and every time the hammer comes down, it fixes nothing. Be honest about what you want, and you can start stepping toward it.

WHAT YOU INVEST, YOU DRAW A RETURN ON

Whatever you invest in your spouse will play a major role in the return you get.

Illustration: Ashleigh's business. My wife is a leader in her industry, in the top 1% of it. I have, at best, a conversational knowledge of what she does. I do not give her content or tell her how to run her business. Not a dollar she makes is mine. But you would be sorely mistaken to think I have not contributed to her results. Every time she wonders whether she can, I tell her she can. I speak life into her constantly. When she needed the house for five days to host people, the kids and I rented a hotel and left. When I invest in her, I get the wife I want out of her.

You have an opportunity to cultivate the spouse you want. Pastor Jason cited a 2022 study on what researchers call *perceived partner responsiveness*: when a spouse feels loved, seen, acknowledged, validated and cared for, sacrifice feels like less of a burden. When I make that investment, she is more willing to do the things she does not want to do, and it does not feel bothersome to her.

OBSERVE

- **Watch how your spouse operates.** Some of us would do well just to spend 15 minutes finding out what our spouse does around the house.
- **Take a shortcut.** Take a personality test and a love language test together, and find out what works for each of you.

Illustration: gifts and physical touch. Ashleigh's top love language is gifts; her lowest is physical touch. My highest is physical touch, and my second highest is also physical touch. So I am spouse aware: for years I bought her little stuffed animals (until the kids took them all), and now when I see something she would like, I bring it to her.

SET REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

You also have to set reasonable expectations about the return you draw. When you know how your spouse operates, you protect yourself from feeling hurt, neglected or abandoned.

Illustration: the bank is closed. Ashleigh is not a morning person. If I go in at 7:30 and try to withdraw on the investment I have made, the bank is closed. So I don't mess with her in the morning. But the other day she came out at eight o'clock, bubbly and talking, and it blessed me, because I knew she was trying 3,000% to be kind to me in the morning. That is spouse awareness.

One more thing: if you are ugly to your spouse, they will never start being nice to you. They are going to mirror what you do.

2. Become Space Aware

We live in different spaces: the home space, the work space, the church space, the in-front-of-the-kids space. Be mindful of every one. If you want to build resentment in your house, be ugly about your spouse in front of your children or stepchildren. It will turn bad on you.

THE ONLINE SPACE

When you go online, the whole world sees it. It has shocked us over the years to see how people talk about their husband or wife on the internet.

Illustration: the comment. A couple of weeks ago Ashleigh posted something kind about our marriage. A woman left a public comment saying the marriage she is in does not feel good anymore, never really did, that it is a marriage of convenience, and that no wonder we were posting ours on the internet. She told the whole world what her marriage is.

Here is the cheat code: go online and write, "My husband's awesome." Save the hard things for your counselor, not Facebook.

HOUSE TRAIN THE ELEPHANT

"The elephant in the room" is the thing everyone is aware of and nobody wants to address. Everybody has one. Yours may be that you get cranky when you are hungry, that you have a short fuse, or that you do not want to talk to anyone before 10 a.m.

The bad news: your elephant is not going anywhere, and neither is your spouse's.

The good news: you can house train your elephant. It does not have to run through the house, jump on the furniture and break things. When you know where you are and what space you are in, you can tell your spouse, "Hey, this is where I'm at. This is how I'm feeling." And the elephant is put at rest.

Illustration: two emotions. I have two emotions: normal mode, and angry. When I walk into the house under pressure, nobody has to make me angry; the pressure looks for a way out. So when I walk in, I tell Ashleigh, "I'm feeling a certain kind of way right now," and she can step in and help. We named the elephant, and the elephant got house trained.

3. Become Self-Aware

You can only house train the elephant if you have the third level of awareness. If awareness were a superpower, this would be Wonder Woman, Spider-Man and Superman rolled into one.

"Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32). Self-awareness produces self-discipline. When you know how you operate, you can take control of how you function, and a self-aware, self-disciplined person is a force to be reckoned with.

Everybody has their own stuff. Have the church tell each other, "You've got stuff."

When you have not identified your stuff, you create a moving target of expectations and triggers that your spouse is not able to anticipate.

Being spouse aware is self-serving, and so is being self-aware. Your spouse cannot help you, support you, serve you or make you feel better if there is an invisible moving target. And they will figure it out long after you do. You have to figure out what is going on with you first.

Sometimes you feel your spouse is ignoring you, smothering you, neglecting you or angering you on purpose. Most of the time it has nothing to do with your spouse. **You have laid landmines all over your life, and your spouse keeps accidentally stepping on them.**

IF YOU CAN DEFINE IT, YOU CAN DEFEAT IT

Identify the weight you carry. What puts you in certain frames of mind? What are you walking into the house with? What did you bring into the marriage? When you can name it, you can self-regulate, and if you can figure you out, you are most of the way there.

Illustration: the IRS. I have been dealing with the IRS lately, and that phone call ought to come with antidepressants. An hour and 15 minutes of hold music. So when I walk in and the forks are facing the wrong way, I want to yell. But because I know what is going on with me, I can stop and say: this is not my kids, this is not my wife. I am carrying stress. That moment lets me slow down, self-regulate and evaluate. I don't always get it right, but over the past six or seven years it has gotten much better.

Then communicate. "When this happens, this is how I feel. I think something from my past affected me in a way I did not realize." Now you do not just house train the elephant. Your spouse steps in and starts to relieve you of what hurts you. When I am stressed, Ashleigh steps in at home. When she is stressed, I step in.

Marriage is a dance. Some of you are struggling because you both keep leaning back at the same time. Somebody leans back, and somebody leans in. We are in this together.

4. You Don't Have to Be Who You Have Been

When you become self-aware, you create an environment where your marriage can succeed, no matter what you came through or grew up with. Ashleigh and I are both testimonies that you do not have to mirror what your parents did. We saw sinful, reckless nonsense in our homes growing up, and we have never walked in it. If you have walked in it, you can walk away from it.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17** ESV
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> [17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Not only do you not have to be your parents, **you do not have to be who you have been.** You can be changed today.

5. Become Jesus Aware

Even if you have a transformation moment today, some Christ followers are still struggling with this. If you have given your life to the lordship of Jesus Christ, you have a major advantage, not only in winning in marriage, but in winning in life. To take self-awareness to a whole new level, become Jesus aware: know your identity in Christ.

Those "who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17). When we anchor our lives in Jesus, we have access to reign in life.

Some will call that the prosperity gospel. This is not "sow a seed and get a Bentley," and it is not "say you need a million dollars and you will get it." But Scripture does say, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2), and Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). And "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Jesus makes life incredible. Have the church say it together. There is transforming power when we see our identity in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

THE MIRROR

> **2 CORINTHIANS 3:18 ESV**
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> 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The word *beholding* carries the sense of looking as in a mirror (the NASB renders it "beholding as in a mirror"). When you look in a mirror, you see yourself. But as a born-again believer, when you look in the mirror you behold the glory of the Lord: your identity in Christ looking back at you. When you see it, you begin to be transformed.

If you are self-aware, you will recognize how much you need that transformation. If you are angry all the time, you need transforming power to flow in that area.

"But preacher, I believe all that, and I am not seeing any transformation." James gives the diagnostic.

> **JAMES 1:22-24 ESV**
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> 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

The person who sees and walks away forgets what he looks like, is not a doer of the word, and goes back to who he was.

CONSISTENCY, NOT INTENSITY

The key word is **intently**. Remember the opening statistic: simply attending church regularly is associated with a dramatically lower likelihood of divorce. Most people live their spiritual lives in short, dramatic bursts: show up every few months, have a good cry, get hands laid on them, leave, and nothing changes. Then they hold God liable for results they are not getting.

Illustration: the lady who shows up every six months. Anyone who has been in Pentecostal churches long enough knows her. She comes once every six months, makes sure everyone knows she is there at the altar, brings a flag or a tambourine, and leaves again while everyone knows her life at home is falling apart. Most of us do a quieter version of the same thing.

You don't need intensity. You need consistency.

The statistic did not say people who pray, read the Bible, serve or tithe. It said the simplest thing: come back to church every week. Do that consistently, and keep remembering your identity. Start to pray. Start to read the Bible. Put a worship leader in the mix with your country music. Turn off the podcasts and sports talk now and then and listen to a preacher. Make Jesus central. We are Building Lives on Jesus, and when people put Jesus at the center of their lives, transformation starts to happen.

Conclusion

You can be self-aware, but when you know who you are in Christ, you go to a whole new level.

Illustration: Ali and the NICU. Almost 13 years ago, the day before Easter, Ashleigh was pregnant with our second daughter, Ali, and we sensed something was wrong. We went to the emergency room expecting to be told everything was fine. Ashleigh was in labor about four months early. Ali was born at 24 weeks, one pound, 13 ounces, and we were prepared for her not to survive the week. Ashleigh had been through the wringer. When we finally got her into a wheelchair and I wheeled her toward the NICU, right as we crossed over, I leaned down and said in her ear, "This is no fault of our own. We are the righteousness of God in Christ."

Anchored in who we were in Jesus, we walked through the scariest and most devastating season of our lives, and the Lord sustained us, strengthened us and made us better. We are grateful for the miracle: Ali got better every single day. But in the hardship, knowing who we were in Christ, we never wavered. We were not screaming at each other. We were on the same team. Our marriage was strong.

- Be **spouse aware**: what you invest, you draw a return on.
- Be **space aware**: name the elephant and house train it.
- Be **self-aware**: if you can define it, you can defeat it.
- Be **Jesus aware**: look intently, and keep looking.

When you know who you are in Jesus, transformation power flows into your life.



ABOUT

PASTOR JASON MAYFIELD

Pastor Jason Mayfield is the Senior Pastor of Citylight Church in Saraland, Alabama, an author, and the creator of POWER 27. He has given more than 20 years to the local church and helps pastors and ministry leaders lead BIG.

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