

MENTOR'S GUIDE

a resource from FamilyLife

PREPARING *for* **MARRIAGE**



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WHAT MENTORS DO BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

Welcome, marriage mentor! Whether you and your spouse are seasoned mentors who carry that title at your church or among your friends or you're a first-timer walking alongside an engaged couple in any formal capacity, *we are so glad you're here*. We've created this guide as a tool to provide perspective and useful tips as you dive into helping the happy couple prepare for matrimony. We want to help you feel encouraged and empowered to be a blessing to your mentees. Here are our best tips for before, during, and after PFM.

BEFORE PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

We did our best to make *Preparing for Marriage* as straightforward as possible. Ultimately, two couples could show up and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, have discussions that will be profitable for everyone involved.

Still, a little intentionality and forethought can go a long way! There are a few simple ways you can prepare yourselves and your story—and pave the way through prayer—for a truly meaningful experience.

PREPARING THE PFM STUDY

You'll want to get comfortable with the contents of the study. Here are some suggestions.

- Read through the Contents page to get an overview of the topics covered and the sequence in which they will be addressed.
- Read the first couple of pages of each chapter to get a feel for the way each topic will be approached.
- Either read through the entire book before your first meeting with the couple or stay at least one chapter ahead throughout your time together.
- If you know of another mentor couple who has gone through PFM, you could reach out to them for any suggestions they may have.
- Come up with your meeting plan and schedule. See the next section in this guide for suggestions.
- You can also access help through the FamilyLife website at familylife.com/gettingmarried.

PREPARING YOURSELF

If you are feeling humbled, or maybe even a little unworthy of taking on the role of marriage mentor, that is a good thing. The fact is, you are not just taking an engaged couple through a study, you're actually bringing the influence of your life and your marriage into the start-up of a new family. That's significant.

Since the message of *Preparing for Marriage* is centered on having oneness-building conversations, why not apply that treatment to the way you and your spouse prepare for leading the study? Start having some meaningful conversations between the two of you about your own marriage—its past, present, and future.

Here are some questions that can help get those conversations started. *(Each of you can take a turn answering each question. You could also come up with some of your own questions.)*

- What do you think is the greatest challenge we have faced as a married couple?
- What two or three decisions would you want us to reconsider if we had them to do over again?
- Was there ever a time when you thought our marriage wasn't going to survive? In your mind, what turned things around and kept us together?
- In what ways has marriage changed you?
- In what ways do you think marriage has changed me?
- Are there any dreams or plans we let die that we need to bring back to life?
- What are your hopes and dreams for our future together?

If you start having these conversations a few weeks before the first time you meet with the engaged couple, you will find yourself thinking more intentionally about marriage overall. And because the journey of your own marriage will be fresh in your minds, you will be more likely to lead from a posture of humility, compassion, and encouragement. Plus, your own relationship will get a boost.

PREPARING YOUR STORY

Though the focus of PFM is on the engaged couple, there will be times when you will want to share some of your own story. Good for you! You should share. The lessons you have learned—whether you learned them the hard way or an easier way—will inspire this couple to persevere in the challenging seasons, endure the mundane moments, and celebrate the sheer happiness of loving and being loved.

There are, however, some guidelines we'd ask you to consider as you think about the when, what, and how of using parts of your story to help mentor the engaged couple.

- **It's a lot about them and a little about you.** Your marriage is going to benefit from PFM, there's no doubt. So, it would be understandable if you get a little excited about your marriage and want to talk about it. But the point is to prepare them for their marriage, so that means keeping the focus on them. They're the lead actors, and you're the supporting cast. They will have more lines than you.
- **Put honesty and vulnerability to work.** It's only natural to emphasize the good times of your marriage and downplay the difficulties. And why not? That's bound to be more encouraging, right? Well, maybe not. People want honesty. They need honesty. So be willing to tell the good and the bad. It's actually more encouraging for this couple to be in the presence of those who have come through the gauntlet and stayed together than to get the impression that a trouble-free marriage is possible.
- **Agree beforehand what is okay to share and what is not.** If you've ever been in a situation where one spouse made an off-limits comment about the other, or violated a confidence about their marriage, you've witnessed a heartbreak. The moment is beyond awkward, and it will probably take a lot of grace and forgiveness to recover the trust that was so quickly and thoughtlessly broken. Don't let this happen to you. While honesty and vulnerability are helpful, they need to be used wisely. And that means that the two of you should be in agreement, especially when sharing sensitive parts of your story. Perhaps even rehearse what you'll say, or agree on a silent signal that will indicate when you're pushing up against a boundary.
- **Don't try to imprint your story on theirs.** Every person is unique, and certainly every couple is, too. Your experiences can model how situations or challenges can be handled in healthy ways, but they can never be duplicated. Nor should they be. Think in terms of sharing principles rather than rules.

- **When telling parts of your story, think *selective, short, and seldom*.** Generally speaking, fewer words have more impact than many. Resist the urge to illustrate every principle with a personal anecdote.
- **Speak well of each other.** A lot of what this couple learns from you is going to happen between the lines. They'll remember some of what you say, but the longer impression will be the way you love and respect each other. Showing respect to each other will not only add to your credibility, it will set an example.
- **Be careful not to slander,** or perhaps not even to name those who brought darkness into your story. If you have been hurt by someone from a previous relationship, or if your parents or other family members have cast a shadow over you, it's probably not necessary to mention them by name.
- **Bring Scripture into your story.** The Word of God has power to teach, reprove, correct, and train that our own words do not (see 2 Timothy 3:16). By aligning your story to passages and principles from the Bible, you are helping this couple learn to process life through a grid of truth.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER

Nothing is more vital to your mentoring preparation than prayer. Human effort and understanding can only go so far, but with God's help, this study can help to set the stage for a marriage that honors God and impacts the world.

“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”—Psalm 127:1 ESV

Marriage is a spiritual endeavor, and mentorship is, too! God wants to use your prayers to make beautiful things happen in your life, relationships, and in your mentees' lives. Here are some ways to pray:

- Pray for an awareness of God's presence when you meet as couples. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in what to say, when to say it, and how to say it.
- Pray for God to move in the couple's hearts, both in your meeting times and outside those times.
- Pray that God would prepare your hearts and that you would lead with wisdom, humility, compassion, and courage.
- Pray against weariness and any attitudes that would make the PFM journey unnecessarily difficult.
- Pray that the couple would not give in to sexual temptation.
- Pray for an abundance of honesty and forgiveness (when necessary).
- Pray that the couple would be captivated by the love of Christ.

Our mention of preparing through prayer is not just a token statement, an attempt to oblige you with a concept one would expect to find in a Christian book. We truly believe in the “everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving” principle of Philippians 4:6 (ESV). All of God's work, which marriage mentoring certainly is, is best done prayerfully.

DURING PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

Now that we've addressed what can be done before you start meeting with the engaged couple, let's survey what you'll do during and between your meetings.

FOLLOW THE FORMAT

Preparing for Marriage is divided into three sections:

- Section One: The Foundation
- Section Two: Where We Are Now
- Section Three: Where We're Going

Section One sets the stage for the rest of study with two foundational chapters. Chapter 1, "Let's Talk about What Marriage Is," looks at marriage from God's perspective—why He created it and what it's for. Chapter 2, "Let's Talk about What Communication Is," is a crash course in good communication—complete with perspective and practical tips to grow towards healthy connecting.

With a solid foundation in place, Section Two guides the couple to discuss more fully their histories and stories through three chapters. Chapter 3, "Let's Talk about Our Past," looks at some of the shaping forces on each person—their family of origin, spiritual journey, and their various relationships. Chapter 4, "Let's Talk about Our Hopes," explores various expectations each person may hold for their future marriage and gives opportunity to ask whether these are realistic or not. Then chapter 5, "Let's Listen to Our People," gives them an opportunity to listen to the advice and stories of their communities.

Section Three starts imagining the path they want their marriage to take and how to get there. They'll explore some of the biggest topics each couple must tackle, like money (chapter 6), sex (chapter 7), relationships with others (chapter 8), faith (chapter 9), and making it for the long haul (chapter 10).

All of the chapters and conversations have questions that the couple needs to reflect on individually, then together, and finally to discuss with you. A few of the chapters and conversations have longer worksheets and interviews that will need to be completed.

LISTEN

All interpersonal ministry requires a high degree of listening—not the kind of listening we do when we're looking for an opening to interject our thoughts into a conversation, but listening as a form of serving. As author Adam S. McHugh explains in *The Listening Life*, "Listening is an act of servanthood. . . . If we wish to imitate Jesus and become servants, we must learn how to listen."¹

The better we are at listening, the more helpful we can be—and the better the chances of our help being received. People listen to people who listen.

Let's consider two questions that can help sharpen your listening skills as a marriage mentor: What are you listening for? and What should you do with what you hear?

1. What are you listening for?

Here are just a few of the cues you want to listen for:

- Repeated names, places, events, etc.—We tend to repeat stories or bring up certain people and events over and over again when they hold a place of significance in our lives—in either good or bad ways. A good listener will make a mental note of these repeats, knowing they might lead to a follow-up conversation.

¹ Adam S. McHugh, [ital] *The Listening Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

- Gaps—All of us have parts of our lives that we'd rather keep hidden. Sometimes it is appropriate to do so, but it can also be unhealthy. Again, a good listener will observe these gaps and wait for a time to inquire about them further, if appropriate.
- Emotion—This may be an easier observation to make because sadness, frustration, regret, happiness, and the like can be more obvious. A good listener is sensitive to emotions that change to a lower or higher level from where they had been.
- Reluctance, refusal, and diversion—In addition to those things we leave unsaid (gaps), we also encounter questions that we have no intention of answering. We might refuse to respond outright, or we might deploy tactics, such as humor or changing the subject, to try to avoid them. Good listeners are prepared to outwait or challenge the speaker if this happens repeatedly.
- Connections—Although “I know exactly how you feel” is rarely a completely true statement, we will hear things that resonate with us. A good listener will judiciously look for such connections and can use them to build empathy and understanding.

2. What should you do with what you hear?

- Be safe. Some people will surprise you with how vulnerable they are willing to be. It is a sacred trust if and when this happens, and also a delicate one. Be a true confidante.
- Pray. In addition to the prayer you put into preparing for each meeting, you may find yourself silently praying rapid prayers for wisdom throughout these conversations. If you hear something from the “What are you listening for?” list above, make sure you've heard from God before you respond. This could even mean waiting until a later meeting to bring it up. Or, it could mean not bringing it up at all, but adding it to what you pray for this person or couple in the future, even after you've finished PFM.
- Call attention to relevant sections in PFM that address the issues that concern you. This will keep the couple, and you as their mentor, on track with your meetings and focused on what you have agreed to accomplish together.
- Share without sermonizing. When appropriate, be prepared to bring insights and principles from Scripture into the conversation, especially if you sense they are thinking in unhealthy and unbiblical ways. Also, be prepared to share anecdotes and lessons from your personal experiences (see “Preparing Your Story” earlier in this guide.)
- Nothing. It isn't necessary to address everything another person says just because we disagree with them or think they need to look at it differently. In fact, the more often we react the less impact our reactions have. The edge is dulled every time we use the axe.

Listening is not just a nap for our vocal cords. Listening is a way to actively serve others. Some of the greatest contributions we make to conversations come after we have listened. No wonder we're told to be “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19 ESV).

GIVE ENCOURAGEMENT

In a mentoring relationship, encouragement can be delivered in two basic ways: (1) by affirming where they are thinking and doing right and (2) by addressing the thoughts, actions, and attitudes that may lead to trouble.

The first is easy to do, right? Even so, you might have to remind yourself of its importance. Don't pass up opportunities to verbally affirm the couple. They are about to enter a new season that will bring many changes to their lives and challenges to their love. A little affirmation from someone they respect (that's you!) can stay with them for a lifetime.

The second one is more difficult because it requires uncomfortable conversations. You still want to be as positive as possible, even when you're correcting, so you'll need to choose your words and timing carefully and prayerfully. Also remember that questions usually invite a more receptive response than statements do. For example, if you notice that the couple has very different opinions about how to handle money, yet they keep saying that they are sure they will come to an agreement once they are married, you know they aren't thinking realistically. So, how can you draw them into a healthy conversation about it? Would it be better to say, "I see a lot of conflict over money in your future," or to ask, "What do you think will happen if the two of you don't come to an agreement about this? What do you think this could mean for your relationship two years from now?" The question approach has a greater chance of drawing them out without putting them on the defensive.

Here is a good motto for mentoring: *Emphasize Encouragement, Correct with Caution*. It's not that correction should be avoided; we all need it from time to time. But the couple needs to know that you are on their side, that you are for them, even when you're addressing hard issues that they are reluctant to face.

BE GENUINE

Staging a house you are trying to sell is a clever move. It gives potential buyers a vision for how enjoyable life could be at that address. But staging is for real estate agents, not mentors. Marriage mentors need to—pardon the cliché—*keep it real*.

We're not suggesting that you should tell all the dirty details of the bad experiences you've had as a married couple, nor are we implying that you should hide them all. But this couple needs to understand that marriage doesn't fix every problem or end every struggle. Let them see the reality of your marriage—what it means to be imperfect humans who forgive each other when necessary and who know what has to be addressed and what can be overlooked.

AFTER PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

If you already had a relationship with one or both of the mentees, then going through the study together is likely going to solidify and deepen your relationship. If this is the beginning of a relationship with them, you may be wondering what happens when the study is over. There's a good chance that after exploring important topics in a safe environment for several weeks, you'll have a deep connection with each other. Especially if you invest not only your time but also your prayers and your heart in them, you'll likely want to look out for more opportunities to help this couple build a strong and healthy marriage. Let's consider three ways you could help them over the long haul.

BE AVAILABLE TO THEM

We encourage you to remain available to this couple for at least the first two years of their marriage. This will require you to be sensitive, to understand when it's appropriate to be either reactive or proactive.

Being *reactive* is the posture of availability, of waiting for the couple to reach out to you. It could be that they will want your advice on a decision, need you to talk and pray them through a conflict, or a host of other possibilities. In any event, the relationship you have established with them has sent a clear message that you have no plans to drop out of their lives. You are *for* them, ready and willing to help when called upon.

CHECK IN WITH THEM

Being *proactive* requires more intent. It involves things such as inviting the couple over to your home occasionally, meeting up with them for dinner or coffee, sending notes and texts, and even going old-school and calling them.

It's possible that you'll end your time going through PFM with some concerns, recognizing that there are issues the couple will face sooner or later. In that case, you may want to check in about these areas in particular, as well as the state of their relationship in general.

At the very least, it could be a comfort to remind them that you are *still* a safe place for them to come with topics that don't often come up naturally with their peers. Most couples will be glad for an older or wiser couple that desires to intentionally bless their marriage over the years. And, a byproduct of your checking in with the couple is that you will be modeling hospitality for them. If they experience the welcoming, loving, nurturing atmosphere of your home, they will be more inclined to offer the same to others. This is one way that they can learn to serve, and this will be good for their marriage.

PRAY FOR THEM

Praying for this couple is a way that you can invest in them before, during, and after *Preparing for Marriage*. You can continue to be a part of the growth of this family beyond the times of personal interaction. In fact, the help and support you offer them through prayer may prove to be the best and most impactful of all your efforts.

There is the risk in mentoring and discipleship relationships that some people might get too attached and overly needy. Your role is to love and serve them, and also to nurture personal responsibility. Therefore, it is helpful to have some boundaries in mind. It's up to you to state them, *if you feel it is necessary to do so*. At the very least, you should have some cautions in mind, such as:

- Avoid taking sides. You can offer advice, and you should certainly ask clarifying questions, but you should generally avoid showing preference for one person's point of view over the other's. In fact, you'll be encouraging their commitment to each other by remaining neutral.

- Monitor the expectations they have of you and work to keep them at a reasonable level. It's okay for the couple to know they are a priority to you, and it's also okay for them to know they are not your only priority.
- Be a team. Don't let either of them confide in one of you but not the other. From the outset, if and when private information is shared with you, make sure the couple knows that what one of you hears, the other will be told.

Now that we've covered some general mentoring principles that can help you before, during, and after your *Preparing for Marriage* sessions, let's talk about the schedule and other details.

SETTING THE MEETING SCHEDULE AND PREPARING FOR YOUR FIRST MEETING

We are providing our recommendation for eight 90-minute discussions, but we also realize there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, you will find some adjusted meeting options following our suggested plan.

SUGGESTED MEETING PLAN

Before your first meeting:

- Plan to meet once per week for eight consecutive weeks.
- Allow for 90 minutes of discussion time during each of your meetings.
- Choose a location where conversations will not be overheard or interrupted.
- Two weeks in advance, be sure that:
 - the couple knows to have completed the first chapter in *Preparing for Marriage* before your first meeting,
 - the couple knows that they are to discuss the questions in each chapter before they meet to discuss them with you,
 - you and your spouse have started reviewing this Mentor's Guide, and
 - you are preparing to conduct the opening interview (see the end of this guide) and discuss chapter 1 of *Preparing for Marriage* at your first meeting.

WEEK 1

- Conduct the Opening Interview
- Discuss chapter 1, "Let's Talk about What Marriage Is."
- Assign them to complete chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 3 includes "Understanding Your Personal History—A Worksheet," which will need to be completed before your next meeting.

WEEK 2

- Discuss the responses to "Understanding Your Personal History—A Worksheet." This will likely take up all your meeting time this week.
- Assign them to complete chapters 4 and 5.

WEEK 3

- Discuss chapters 4 and 5, as well as any sections of "Understanding Your Personal History—A Worksheet" that you were unable to get through last week.
- Assign them to read chapter 6, "Let's Talk about Money," and to complete and discuss the exercises.

WEEK 4

- Discuss “Let’s Talk about Money.”
- Assign them to read chapter 7, “Let’s Talk about Sex,” and to complete and discuss the exercises.

WEEK 5

- Discuss “Let’s Talk about Sex.”
- Assign them to read chapter 8, “Let’s Talk about Relationships with Others,” and to complete and discuss the exercises.

WEEK 6

- Discuss “Let’s Talk about Relationships with Others.”
- Assign them to read chapter 9, “Let’s Talk about Faith,” and to complete and discuss the exercises.

WEEK 7

- Discuss “Let’s Talk about Faith.”
- Assign them to read chapter 10, “Let’s Talk about the Long Haul,” and to complete and discuss the exercises.

WEEK 8

- Discuss “Let’s Talk about the Long Haul.”
- Consider some way to celebrate the completion of PFM.

OPTIONS FOR ADJUSTING THE MEETING PLAN

In the event that you need to adjust the schedule, here are some options to consider:

If you want to meet *more* than eight times, you could:

- Have a meal together for your first and last meetings. Conduct the Opening Interview over dessert in the first meeting, and make the last meeting and meal a celebration and a time to speak blessings over the couple.
- Give a full meeting to each of the chapters.

If you need to meet *fewer* than eight times, you could:

- Send the questions for the Opening Interview to the couple in advance so you can read through their answers before your first meeting. In this case, you may choose not to discuss the interview but only refer to their responses as helpful background information.
- Extend your discussion times to two hours so you can cover more ground in each meeting.
- Combine some of the chapters and conversations. If you do this, we suggest the following plan:

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 3 and 5

Chapter 4

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapters 9 and 10

THE OPENING INTERVIEW

Ideally, this interview will be conducted with all four people present—the engaged couple and the mentoring couple—during the first meeting.

NAMES: _____

1. How did you meet? How long have you been dating each other?
2. How long have you been engaged? When are you planning to get married?
3. Briefly tell about your families.

Are your parents still alive? _____

Do you have brothers or sisters? If so, how many? Brothers _____ Sisters _____

Are any of your brothers or sisters already married?

4. How well have you gotten to know each other's family?
5. How do your family and friends feel about your relationship?
6. Have you ever broken off your relationship? If so, why did this happen?
Why did you get back together?

7. Why do you think your marriage will work?

8. Are there any specific concerns or problems that you feel need to be addressed in your relationship?

9. Have either of you been married before? If so, were you widowed or divorced?

10. Do either of you have any children from a previous marriage or relationship?

11. Briefly describe your spiritual background.
What part has God played in each of your lives?

What part has God played in your relationship thus far? What part do you expect Him to have in your marriage?

12. Describe what your physical involvement with each other has been up to this point. What are your boundaries?

13. What do you hope to receive from going through *Preparing for Marriage*?