

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
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Praying Circles Around Your Marriage  
Joel and Nina Schmidgall

**Pastor Joel:** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He created the light and he saw that it was good and he created the seas and the land and he saw that it was good. Over seven days, God created and seven times the scripture says, and he saw that it was good when he created it was good until Genesis chapter two, verse 18. It says the Lord God saw man and he said, it is NOT good for man to be alone. We are wired for relationship and this is a part of, since the very origins of creation, God spoke to us. This idea that isolation will lead to frustration and God is a God of relationships and we are made in his image, right? And so we receive this divine character trait within our soul, and God doesn't just bless vision he blesses relationship and all different kinds of relationship. We see Jonathan and David and it's this beautiful covenant relationship where they put their life and livelihood on the line for their friendship. And we see Moses and Aaron, they're brothers and their co-leaders and they bring Israel out of captivity. And we see Elijah and we see Elisha and it's this mentor and mentee relationship and they are so blessed that God actually does double the amount of miracles through their relationship. We see this all over Mary and Joseph and Naomi and Ruth and all these different relationships throughout the scripture, we see healthy relationships are modeled. If, if, if we come together, God pours out blessing and multiplies who we are.

**Nina:** So for the next four weeks we're going to explore the power of relationship in a series called 'Better Together' and we are going to give practical challenges and talk about the power of words and of building relationship with those that are different from you. But today we want to focus on the relationship with the greatest proximity, marriage. So, I just want to be clear that when we say better together, we're not meaning better in marriage, right? The goal of this message isn't to convince people to step into marriage or to elevate marriage as the ultimate goal and that's a misstep that maybe the larger church has made over the years, right? As we talk about marriage or present marriage as though it is the ultimate goal for all or even at that that is God's plan and purpose for all or something that even everyone is striving towards and we know that is just not really the case, right? Marriage is not God's intention for all of our community and we don't want to communicate in a way that gives that assumption.

When we say better together, we mean better in relationship and we're going to spend the next few weeks exploring a lot of different kinds of relationship, but for those that do make the decision to marry the scripture does present it as a sacred relationship, right? We see in the Bible actually that marriage as used as a reflection for Christ's relationship with his church. So we know that it is sacred and because of that we believe that there is a sacred work in caring for marriages. All of us, regardless of our marital status, we should be invested in supporting the sacred relationship of marriage.

So, there's some of you that are in this room that is saying wow, it doesn't really look like couples are, are better together, right? And, I don't know that I might just want to avoid that whole marriage thing, it seems to include a level of maybe pain or destruction or even risk. Then

there are some of you in this room that are longing for marriage and you think, man, I would be better together with someone else, a better version of myself with someone else. And there's others of us that are in marriage and it doesn't always feel like we are better together. Marriage doesn't make us better, God uses marriages of refining tool that is certain and that can be said for all of relationships. They really are one of the best gifts of relationship, something that God uses for our own growth and refining. But no one person can ever give you identity or purpose, right? God has already done all of that for you and if you don't know that you're going to put pressure on someone else. And that is really just unfair.

So, Joel and I, we've been walking with many over a number of years, engaged couples or couples that are preparing for marriage or couples that are maybe walking through struggle or pain in their marriage, some actually that have even come to a point of crisis in their marriage and we have a conviction that God really can grow you exponentially through covenant relationship. And so from that place, we've actually spent this last year pouring our hearts and all of ourselves into a resource that we hope will bless and build couples. So, in just a few days actually 'Praying Circles Around Your Marriage', our book will release, I know very exciting. And we're really thrilled to gift all of the couples at NCC with a copy of the book. So, if you are married or engaged, please grab a copy of that book when you step out today, but it is our hope that this message, no matter where you are, no matter your marital status, that you really will find the principles that will be shared here today, that will be transferable into all sorts of relationships. So, we want to talk about how, how can we be better together in marriage?

**Pastor Joel:** So trying to figure out what do we call this message and we actually felt like, okay, we have the perfect title. This is the State of the Union [Laughing] the perfect weekend. And so I'm here today standing in front of you, Mrs. Speaker, to let you know that the State of our Union is good. [Laughing, clapping, cheering] That's right, see we're in cahoots here. What were we talking about though, seriously?

We want to talk about how, how can we be better together in marriage? And the first thing that I want to talk about is seeking God's plan. And when you stood up in front of all those people and professed your vows to your spouse and you weren't covenanting with your marriage officiant, you weren't covenanting with the friends or the family or the weird uncle or the wedding coordinator. You were covenanting with your spouse to God. That's what the scriptures say in Ephesians 5:21. Paul says this, he says; submit one to another, Lord. Help us there. Right? We're not going to cover... That's a whole sermon itself; *"Submit one to another out of reverence for Christ."*

A marriage isn't just between two people. You're looking at me all squirrely eyed like, where are we going with this one? It's like a triangle, right? We are inviting God; we submit one to another out of reverence for Christ. It's God who shows up in our marriage and gives us vision together. It's God who shows up and makes us new and sets us on a new path. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and what are all these things shall be added unto you. If you're in a business and you have a coworker and your coworker and you have different visions, what's going to happen over time, you're gonna over time, begin to have conflict and tension because you're going opposite directions. What happens? Your boss shows up and your boss reorients and reminds you, listen, this is where our vision is. Now you're playing different parts, but we're driving towards the

same vision. That's what God does in our marriage. He shows up and he reorients our minds, our brains, our spirits. He reminds us that this is the vision that I have given to each one of you and this is where we're going.

The word division that's made up of two parts. The first is the prefix d or di, which means two, and so you have two visions. That's what division literally means two visions. So in your marriage, I just, I wonder if some of our marriages are in such a hard fix, or in constant conflict, maybe because there's two visions in the house. Do you have shared vision in your marriage or do you have division? Have you separated where you're going? Luke 11:17 says... *"Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall."*

Let me ask you, if you and your spouse have a thousand decisions to make, what percentage of those decisions will end in argument? Right, like maybe if you're a great marriage, 10 percent or if you're normal, maybe it's 30 or 40 or 50 or 60 or 70 or 80, right? The number keeps going up. What would happen though, if you have... here's what shared vision does. When you have a shared vision, you make a pre decision for a thousand decisions that you're on the same page for, and this is part of I think for Nina and I, this is part of our prayer in this whole process, in this message we're praying, maybe God, you can give a shared vision to our marriage, to our marriages that are in this church, to whoever is listening here today. Maybe you have some way to bring us together and in. Here's what happens when you get a shared vision, you start playing offense instead of defense, don't you? And you take the fight to the street instead of having the fight in the house.

I want to skim this. I'm going to go quick, you guys, but I want to talk you through a little bit of the progression for Nina and I and how we've walked through this. The vision birth from our values helps us walk with a purpose. So you go from values to vision to purpose. Values are what's important to us. Our values then inform our vision. A vision is a shared way of seeing; a vision then begets a purpose, a purpose is a shared way of doing. The whole process though is birthed in prayer. The whole process is bathed in prayer. The whole process comes through when we get on our knees and when we seek God.

Now, how in the world do we even step into some of this concept or how do we go down this path? What if you tried to just prayerfully lean into a few questions? Let me throw a couple out to you. What gifts are unique to you as a couple? Where do we work best together? What sort of impact do we want to make in our community? Now, can I take it a step further? Okay, when we talk about covenant, when you covenant together, you're not just merging lives, right? No, you're coming together as one and in Biblical covenant, listen; something will always come to life. Listen to this. Listen, listen, listen, in Biblical covenant, something will always die. We don't like that right there. That's every time in the scripture when you see covenant, something dies an animal dies because to signify the importance of the covenant and the sacrifice that is being made for that to come about.

One of my buddies, he had a specific routine where he loved to go to the club after work. When he got married, he said, guys, I have to die to this. Actually, he said, you know what? I have to keep dying to this because it's something I have routined over time and I've got to let it go. Maybe it's not that intense for you. Maybe it's something different. Maybe it's an individual

vision that needs to be rethought in the context of relationship. Maybe it's a work culture that keeps you from a marriage priority, but I would say this, that prayer is a key to this process. I don't know how people are married without prayer. I'm just saying from personal experience, I don't know. I need prayer because listen, I'm right 99 percent of the time. Come on. Where are you? Come on. I see a few hands and a few elbows going at the same time right there. But here's the problem you're right 99 percent of the time that math doesn't add up, does it? It doesn't equal, I need the Holy Spirit to show up and bring his conviction into my soul. When my knees hit the ground, humility hits my heart. I need the spirit of God at work within me to move me, to change me. Mark 10 says that the two will become one. Jesus is using some fuzzy math here. He's saying, what's one plus one? It's one, that doesn't make any sense, does it? We think it's a 50/50 proposition, you give half and I give half and it comes together and we are complete that. No, he said it's a 100 percent that I give and 100 percent that you give and what does that equal 100 percent. Why? Because we both have to die to ourselves and we come together and then God births something new out of us.

In Genesis one, after God created man and woman, he didn't just say, go chill, now, go relax. He didn't say; go pursue your own vision. No, he created them and then Genesis 1:28, be fruitful and multiply; rule over the birds and animals and sea and plants. Work the land and take care of it and after they were given each other then they were given a purpose and it was a purpose that could only be accomplished together. It was a legacy calling that they were given; they didn't sit down with a whiteboard to figure out what their vision was they just spent time with the Almighty. And this is what happens in prayer when we go after God all throughout the scriptures vision is only received when somebody gets on their knees, when somebody goes after God. The disciples didn't get a vision by talking about it around a board room. No, they got a vision by getting down on their knees and going to God in the upper room. He has some vision to dispense to our marriages today. Are we getting on our knees? Are we going after him? When we go after him, he teaches us self sacrifice and he pours out vision into our souls.

**Nina:** So we're going to seek God for his plan and we're going to keep conflict healthy. Have you ever noticed that most couples are really different from one another, right? In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul calls marriage a profound mystery and it really is a profound mystery how people that are so different always tend to be attracted to what seems to be the opposite of themselves. And that is certainly true in our marriage for sure. We are pretty opposite in a lot of different ways. I am a morning person, very much a morning person and Joel's a night person. My voice tends to have a lot of volume. Joel, you might not know actually tends to speak quieter unless the Bears are playing, the Chicago Bears, in which case he is very, very loud, very loud and angry sometimes angry. In the car Joel gets very animated at other drivers, which makes me get very animated at Joel.

**Pastor Joel:** Can I just cut, okay, because somebody interprets yellow lights as stop and somebody interprets yellow lights as go, right? And where's my go people here today? See, see what I'm saying? That was like 51 percent.

**Nina:** Okay

**Pastor Joel:** But good lookin' and ugly, right? So, did I get it back right there?

**Nina:** Sure

**Pastor Joel:** That's actually, you think I'm ripping on myself, but actually you get ripped off in that equation.

**Nina:** Okay. So, we think differently. We navigate conflict differently, we really process our entire response is processed differently. And so the gift in difference, right, it really does lead to things that are beautiful. I mean, if you think about the contrast that's in a painting without the contrast in a painting, you really just have a one color canvas, right? Or without the balance of harmonizing notes you don't have the same beautiful piece of music. For sure we like contrast in the foods that we eat, right? Who loves like salty and sweet together, ooo it's like my favorite combination. Or there's sweet and spicy or you know, for sure that's what makes the explosions of flavor. But the compliment of opposites only works if you celebrate the differences. Right? And let's just be clear that tolerating each other's differences is different than celebrating each other's differences.

So, Joel and I, we made a commitment because we are so different and that shows up so regularly that we will celebrate the differences in each other. And in fact, just, you know, a number of years ago when we took the Gallup StrengthsFinder assessment and we realized we had totally different, no overlapping strengths. Joel, of course in his positivity, said that means we don't just have five strengths we have 10. So, but often right, the differences, the things that we seem to be attracted to in another that because they are different than ourselves those things seem novel and unique in the beginning, but often they can become the things that really create a wedge between us, right? Differences can be a recipe for trouble. They can be something that leads to conflict, so conflict is one of the most draining and feared parts of any relationship. But it is inevitable, right? We face conflict in every relationship that we encounter, whether it's with our, our bosses or our coworkers or our friends or our neighbors and marriage is the relationship with the greatest proximity. So, it does make sense that we would for sure encounter friction in our marriages. And because we are imperfect people with a sin nature, we will certainly face disagreement with the person that we share the most heart space and the most physical space. And our God is a creative God who created two individuals though we are flawed it does really take a lot of work to protect our unity as a couple. And so we need to remember that conflict is not bad, but it does need to be healthy. And so rather than striving for a perfect relationship, we can strive for a healthy relationship, one that refines us, one that makes us our best selves, and we can ask the Lord to use our trials and our marriages, our differences to grow and to refine us.

So disagreeing well doing that well, that is not easy, but it takes a lot of practice to get it right. Some people have more practice than others, maybe in our marriage. One important way to move towards health is to consider and to think about the true source of conflict. So if you think about it, the true source of our conflict is almost always not getting something that we want, right? It's almost always the unmet expectations that become the point of contention in all of our relationships, but especially in marriage. And the scriptures confirm this in James four he writes; where do those fights and quarrels among you come from? They come from your selfish desires that are at war within your bodies, aren't they? You want something but do not get it. If your partner says something in a fight that is unkind, realize that this behavior is almost always a distress signal for something that they are not getting and you can defuse conflict by

understanding, seeking to understand that unmet need. And it might appear in relationships that there might be some spouses that have a greater willingness to engage in battle and in truth; all parties have a conflict or usually in defense or preservation mode. Actually, all parties are somehow engaging in defense or preservation mode but it looks different, right? And individuals respond differently to what they might perceive as a threat. It's part of our biology to defend ourselves if we're feeling threatened or feeling vulnerable, but some people become a little more confrontational. They use an attack response as a defense and others will respond to that same threat with an escape response, retreating for protection.

Dr. Curly Most, who's one as a marriage therapist at NCC who just... she speaks into us as we try to speak into couples and she refers to the us and tells us the phrase, it's a tiger response or a turtle response. Neither is wrong, both are trying to be safe. In our marriage, my desire to solve a problem often it pushes me to engage in conflict, right, and Joel's desire for peace can sometimes lead him to take measures to avoid collision. And perhaps as you examine these tendencies, you think about the tiger or the turtle, you can already see your disposition; you can imagine which one is you. And if it's not managed well, either response can destroy a marriage, right, either from damaging ongoing confrontation, or from avoidance that can lead to pain and resentment.

So in addition to examining the root cause of a conflict, what it is, what need it is that's going unmet. Another healthy approach is to use your positive imagination to fill the gaps with positive assumptions. In the midst of conflict, we can find ourselves engaging in a very unhealthy inner monologue. Our thoughts can start to tell us lies, right? Things like he cares more about his job more than me, I'm not even a priority to him anymore. Or all she does is nag me, it's like she wants to change me into someone else. I don't know what that inner dialogue looks like for you, but God's word does remind us to guard our hearts, right? It's the place from which everything flows and our minds, they can be like a train, right, a train that if we get on it is going to take off to some destination and it might end up somewhere that we don't want to be.

So, the word of God has much to say about our thoughts. In II Corinthians 10:5 Paul urges us to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. In Proverbs 23:7 reads, as a man thinks in his heart, so is he. And the Apostle Peter writes to think clearly, to exercise self control. Marriage therapist, Dr Norman Wright, says your marriage is affected more by your inner conversation than your outer conversation. Practicing good mental hygiene when it comes to thinking about your spouse will make all the difference in the pleasure that you will derive from your marriage. So, in those moments when your inner monologue starts to paint a picture that isn't true, it's important to zoom out and to do a reality check.

And early in our marriage because I have a tendency for that inner monologue to become a train that goes somewhere and I started this habit where I would start to create a narrative that wasn't true, I would ask myself the question, what do I know to be true? And I told some trusted friends and girlfriends in my life and they actually echoed this sentence back to me sometimes when that inner monologue or sometimes outer monologue is starting to run away, right? They'll say, Nina, what do you know to be true? And my responses to those questions can bring the picture back into focus, right? I know that our family is Joel's number one priority. I know that he would never do anything to intentionally hurt me. I know that he values me and our marriage. So in those conferences is where I would like my mind to find its final resting place. And it's in those

truths that I want my marriage to be founded. So, seeking to understand our spouses unmet needs, guarding our mind and thoughts, and these are steps that can help keep our conflict healthy.

**Pastor Joel:** So we started with talking about God's plan for our marriage and for us and then Nina just talked about healthy conflict. The third thing I want to talk about is committing to connection. There's a reason you get an oil change in your car every 5,000 miles because you need to keep your engine working at its top capacity and you need to keep it clean and you need to keep it in full capacity essentially. Now, if you decide not to pay that \$50 here and there, what are you going to do? You're going to pay \$4,000 for a new engine, aren't ya? That's what happens. And we think that our relationships just don't need maintenance at all. You can just leave them alone and we pour into self for years we pour into self and we work on personal development and professional development for our workplace. But we get married and we just think aah everything's gonna be fine. We know this is true in our relationship and our walk with God and faith as well. We see this throughout scripture and we know if we're not in the scriptures regularly, we got a shallow faith, don't we? We've got a faith that won't last when the hard times come. We're challenged in the scripture, Psalm 1:2 delight in him and meditate on his word. How often day and night, pray without ceasing, the scripture say. Draw nigh unto me and I will draw nigh unto you, James four talks about. He who dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. You'll get out of relationship what you put into it.

What are you investing in your relationship? If you plant cucumber seeds, what do you get? You get cucumbers. If you plant soybeans, help me out here. If you plant soybeans, what do you get? If you plan nothing, what do you get? You get weeds. We think we get nothing. But that's not true. You plant nothing and weeds will show up in the nothing. And here's what happens weeds don't just fill the nothing. Then they start to creep over into the good areas, into the fruit, into the seed, in the areas that were going, well, all of a sudden there's weeds starting to tangle in and strangle up those areas that were working so good. It's the second law of thermodynamics that says everything is constantly moving towards chaos. That's true in our relationships, isn't it? If you just leave things alone, where's it gonna go? It's gonna go towards chaos. But it's intentionality, it's committing to intentionality that allows God to continue to plant seeds that will grow up through the watering of the Holy Spirit in our walk and in our marriage. Here's what Eleanor Roosevelt said; she said, success in marriage depends on being able when you get over being in love to really love. So, the goal is not to fall in love, anyone can do that. The goal is to grow in love.

Can I just throw out a couple of quick ideas at you? What does it mean? What are some ideas to grow in love? First set daily intention, write a post it note and maybe it says something like this, I intend to bring joy to my spouse today. Then stick it in your pocket or stick it on the back of your phone and try to actually practice that. You might say, you know, I didn't do anything bad today or this week. Well, that's not the goal. The goal is to do something that encourages and to lift up and to build up, that's what Ephesians five talks about. We've got to be filled in the spirit and then you sing these spiritual songs and Psalms and you speak encouragement over your spouse.

Number two; be a student of your spouse. It took me 10 years you guys to figure out that clothing is not a good gift to buy for my wife. And I buy you a blouse and you just wouldn't wear it and I get you the hat and the pants and you'd return them and like for 10 years I just didn't get it. And you're like, okay, what are you, what are you trying to say here? Are you trying to say that that clothing is a bad gift for women? No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that clothing is a bad gift for my woman. A good gift is to go get a well timed cup of coffee or it's that skin vanilla latte, less sweet, extra hot on it, and you get that and you show up. Listen, it's being a student of your spouse. What are those little nuances, those little details that you are learning consistently that you're finding ways to love and be a student of your spouse.

Number three, make time to connect. When's the last time you revealed the depths of your spirit to your partner? You shared your pains, convictions, and desires. I don't mean when they rub you the wrong way and it just pours out. I mean intentionally sharing what the Lord is doing or where you're struggling. The goal in marriage is to know and to be known intimately by your spouse, to get practical. How do you spell intimacy? Some of us spell it T A L K. Others spell it differently. You know what I'm saying? She told me to stay clear? I'm trying to stay in my lane right here. Okay. Intimacy, what does it look like to you? What does it mean to share intimacy in emotional in physical in spiritual ways?

Number four, commit to a regular touch-point. Nina and I are very drastically different in our communication styles and especially interpersonally, and so years ago we put in place this weekly Sunday night walk where we just knew every Sunday night, nothing complicated, but we're going to have intentional, consistent conversation and we learned things along the way. We realize, okay, we shouldn't just go into that night and start laying into the other person like, man, okay, glad we're here; man, that thing you did on Friday was driving me nuts it's time we can talk about it. And then Saturday you did it again and I couldn't believe that Sunday and you're telling me how I should drive. And I'm like, yellow light means go. You know, but we realized we need some, a third party, and so we just decided we're going to ask consistent questions. And so, we had questions that we would come back to all the time. So things like...

- How can I be a better spouse to you? Do you see them up on the screen right now?
- Is there anything that happened this past week?
- How can I pray for you?

These are questions, these are prompt points that we used and they helped us to talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly. And it was great because instead of like five minutes before you're leaving, walking out the door, you got stress getting ready for work, that's a terrible time to have a conversation, isn't it? But you intentionally put a time on the calendar where you're going to ask these questions and be prompted to have good conversation.

Now, on your way out, we've actually got some bookmarks with these questions. If you're married, one of our prayers is that you would actually put a time on your calendar consistently every week. Use this bookmark as prompt questions and God will use it.

**Nina:** We just want to take a quick pause here because we know that for some people, you know, we're talking about the oil change and for some people the place that you are in your marriage is



not at the oil change stage, right? It's not the check engine light, it's maybe way over here with you know, at this stage of maybe needing an engine replacement, it feels like really the marriages on the brink. And can we just say for a second that we have been really prayerful over those couples. I think we have a very soft heart for those that are really tough and difficult place of their marriage and we just want to speak a word of hope. We want say that we stand with you and hope, right and we are believing God with you. You know, I might just also mentioned that these are the circumstances in which God does his best work, right, the times that it feels most desperate. And we've walked with a number of couples that have really come through or around situations and we don't say when we speak, hope that's not a false hope, right? That we actually have seen God perform incredible miracles so we are believing that with you.

And then there's other couples that really their marriage has come to an end and they're at a place where they're still just wrestling with the Lord about the story not being written the way that they intended. Right? And we just want to remind you that God is near, God is very near and that our God is in the business of redemption, right, and restoration and opening his plans and purposes and redeeming his work in your lives and so we're believing with you for that as well.

If there is anything in either of those situations or any couples that are kind of walking in that place and there is anything that we can do to help, we want to do that. And so there's a link on the screen or there will be... [care.theaterchurch.com](http://care.theaterchurch.com). And we hope that you would maybe go there and just reach out and let us just walk with you. We have been very prayerful in months and especially in this last week of just asking God to come alongside of those couples and to help us to do the same. And for those, you know, in the coming weeks we're going to be talking about a lot of different kinds of relationship, but for those of you that are in a place and in your marriage where you would love to continue some of these conversations, we just have a few ways how...

First of all, the questions that Joel mentioned, we're going to put a card in your hand when you leave and would you just consider maybe being intentional to step into that place of touch-points to maybe setting up an ongoing touch-point with your spouse and just seeing what God does with it, you know.

And then also we would really encourage you to consider if you haven't already a marriage small group here at NCC. That is one of the best ways to see God do something really intentionally in your marriage is by surrounding yourself with just the relationship of others.

And then finally, Joel and I are actually going to experiment with something, we're gonna experiment with... we're calling it an online marriage experience, it's actually three weeks to just continue some of these conversations. So if you would have an interest in that, there is a link and you can go on and register and we will send you the link to do that from the comfort of your home.

[ncc.re/marriedgroups](http://ncc.re/marriedgroups) [ncc.re/marriageexperience](http://ncc.re/marriageexperience)

**Pastor Joel:** So let me invite our campus pastors to come and all of our locations and couples as well. And we've realized over the years that support is critical to our relationship, isn't it? And so

having others in our lives and specifically those who are down the path a little bit from us and so we're honored to have such wonderful wise couples come and just speak in just a moment over us at our congregations. But let me just say this, Nina and I are praying for you, you have been prayed for. We are believing that God is able to do exceedingly and abundantly more than you can ask or imagine in your marriages, in your relationships, and so we're with you today. Okay, Jesus name. Amen.