

5 PRACTICES — OF A — THRIVING MARRIAGE



SPARK DISCIPLESHIP

Over the course of our marriage journey together, Holly and I have embarked on numerous endeavors, exploring various practices, rhythms, and habits to nurture and strengthen our relationship. **Through trial and error, laughter, and tears, we've distilled our experiences into these five essential practices that have become the cornerstone of our thriving marriage.** These practices have not only deepened our connection, but have also enriched our lives and the lives of the couples we have taught and trained in ways we never imagined possible.

In this guide, we're excited to share an overview of these five vital practices that will help you get the ball rolling. While every couple's journey is unique, **we believe that incorporating these practices into your relationship can yield transformative results and foster a deeper sense of intimacy and companionship.**

Our aim is not to provide a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather to offer insights and practical steps that you and your partner can explore together. We understand that every marriage is a work in progress, and growth often comes from embracing new experiences and challenges as a team.

As we delve into each practice, we encourage you to approach this guide with an open heart and a willingness to engage with your spouse in meaningful conversations and shared activities. **Building a thriving marriage requires intentionality, commitment, and a willingness to invest time and effort into nurturing your relationship.**

While our journey has had its ups and downs, we've discovered that by prioritizing these practices, we've cultivated a deeper connection and a stronger bond that continues to sustain us through life's twists and turns. Our hope is that by sharing our insights and experiences, we can inspire and empower you to cultivate a marriage that thrives, one step at a time.

So let's embark on this journey together, hand in hand, as we explore the five essential practices that can lay the groundwork for a lifetime of love, joy, and companionship in marriage.

PRACTICE 1: DAILY TIME TO CONNECT

Ephesians 2:10: For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

“Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.” —Jim Rohn

I (Mike) got away for some time to be able to think, dream, and share in some rich learning experiences with kingdom-minded business owners in Austin, Texas. These opportunities to get out of the normal day-to-day are incredibly important. I've repeatedly experienced what author Mark Batterson said: “change of place, change of pace, change of perspective.”

The change of perspective began to happen as I reflected on my daily interactions with Holly. I noticed a pattern: our conversations often revolved around the events of the day rather than the emotions tied to those events. I'm not going to lie, sharing my emotions is hard for me to do, but I knew this was what my wife desired and needed, and was an area I needed to work on and grow in as well.

While it might seem a little sentimental to some, I've come to understand that this characteristic or attribute is what distinguishes so many great husbands, fathers, and leaders that I have learned from and admire. By becoming more attuned to my own feelings, I've become more sensitive to the emotions stirring within my wife's heart.

Having a breakthrough moment like this, I crafted a plan, one that I want to invite each of you to embark on with us. It's all too easy to slip into mindless activities after a long workday or once the kids are asleep. It's so easy to lose ourselves in bingeing shows or scrolling endlessly through social media feeds. While we may justify these actions as “spending time together” by “unwinding or decompressing,” in truth, we're slowly disconnecting from our spouses one binge watch or doom scroll at a time. Don't get us wrong, we love a good Netflix binge, but if our daily rhythm is to turn on the streaming services without connecting at the end of the day, we are missing a key opportunity.

We all yearn for intimacy in our marriage – that deep connection that binds us together. But sometimes, knowing how to nurture it can feel like navigating a maze in the dark.

We define marital intimacy as the selfless pursuit of both partners connecting emotionally, spiritually, and physically over a period of time.

When it comes to connecting daily, we need to focus on the emotional side of intimacy.

Does anyone ever reach the end of the day and find your words are gone? You're trying to answer the question, “Honey, how was your day?” and you feel like you are struggling to say something meaningful.

We can totally relate to this, as we have lost track of how many times we have come to the end of the day without the words to describe all that has happened. This structure has helped us think thoughtfully through our day BEFORE meeting so we can have intentional conversations.

Starting today, let's set aside 15 minutes each evening to be fully present with our spouses and engage in two simple, yet profound, practices. It's a small step, but oh, the impact it can have!

First, let's inquire about our partner's heart. Let's ask them directly, "What's weighing on your heart today? How are you feeling?" But here's the crucial part: let's resist the urge to solve or fix anything immediately. Instead, let's sit with our spouses, free from judgment, and truly listen to the emotions they've experienced throughout the day. This is a great opportunity to validate their feelings without trying to change them.

Second, we want to open up and share our own hearts with our spouses. It's best to use feeling words that help articulate our experiences and reflection on the day, saying things like, "I felt saddened when..." or "I felt frustrated with..." Simply expressing our emotions in this way not only engages our minds but also strengthens our intimate bond.

Our daily rhythm is to sit down at the kitchen table once the kids have gone to bed, make a cup of tea (decaf, of course, as we are getting older), and share our observations of the day going through a simple acronym that helps SPARK the conversation.

Here is how we use SPARK as an acronym to help us share what's happening in our inner worlds:

S—Share: What did I learn today about life, myself, and God?

P—Purposeful: Were there any purposeful conversations & interactions?

A—Actions: What steps did I take towards the things that are meaningful to me and my calling?

R—Realizations: Were there any lies believed, truths, or wins that happened today?

K—Know: Is there anything pressing your spouse needs to know?

This method is simple enough that it causes us to pause and reflect on our day and even frequently stirs times of thankfulness to God for where we saw Him work throughout the day. We don't always have a point for every letter that we share, but we choose 1-2 that we feel are the most important for our spouse to be aware of.

The Holy Spirit has used this little practice of connection in incredible ways to build our friendship and intimacy with each other. We can't encourage you enough to allow Him to speak and reveal to you daily what to share with your spouse to create a deeper, intimate connection.

Join us in this important daily practice by dedicating just 15 minutes each evening to sharing your SPARK reflections with your spouse. Let's discover together how much richer our marriages and relationships can become, fostering deeper feelings of connection, joy, communication, and even more tangible intimacy in our marriage.

PRACTICE 2: THE WEEKLY HUDDLE

1 John 2:6: Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

“The key is not to prioritize your schedule but to schedule your priorities.”
—Steven Covey

There are very few practices in our marriage that have been a catalyst for change like The Weekly Huddle. This simple rhythm has enabled us to connect regularly, share victories and frustrations, and prioritize what truly matters in our lives with a 7-day focus.

This weekly practice becomes even more vital as life gets busier with kids, careers, and friendships. It doesn't matter if you have been married for 6 days or 36 years. This is one that will help you to live together with kingdom-minded intentionality.

One of our favorite verses, Proverbs 19:21, reminds us that while we may make plans, it's ultimately the Lord's purpose that prevails. So we enter this practice with open hearts and minds, asking for the Lord to be the one that establishes our steps and commitments to be good stewards of what he is calling us to join Him in.

So, what exactly is The Weekly Huddle?

It's a dedicated time each week for us to connect and plan our week with our spouse. This isn't a time for us to bring all of our ideas and dreams, nor is it a time to go through the hourly play-by-play of each day—this is a time where we can look at our commitments, see where we are spending our time, reflect on whether we are aligned with what we are committing ourselves to, and seeing a bird's-eye view of being under or overly engaged.

To get started, choose when and where to meet on a weekly cadence. Choose a time and place where you can have an uninterrupted 60 minutes to focus on each other and your priorities. For us, Sunday nights work best; once the kids are in bed, we can gather around the kitchen table with our calendars.

We start our time with a prayer to center our hearts on the Lord and to seek His guidance. Then, we go through each day of the week and share what's on the calendar. While we talk, this is a great time to practice active listening as we share our wins, challenges, and priorities for the week ahead. It's important that we use this time to review our

commitments, plan our week, and then create a to-do list together.

One benefit that we have found is for each of us to take “ownership” over The Weekly Huddle, specifically in our to-do list, so that we know who is doing it and when they hope to have it completed. We’ve seen time and time again that discipline helps create an environment of freedom for our family. Taking ownership of our to-do list requires that we each check our egos and serve each other with a high degree of humility. This means that we admit our mistakes, take ownership of our responsibilities, and then together develop a plan to overcome the challenges that will come. This has been integral to our family's mission and vision.

Finally, we close our time in prayer, surrendering our plans to Jesus and asking for His wisdom and direction as we go into the week ahead.

This is one of the practices that will require a full commitment from you both, but it could be incredibly transformational in how you plan, connect, and uplift each other regularly. We can’t encourage you enough to commit to this rhythm for the next four weeks and evaluate your progress.

PRACTICE 3: THE ANNUAL VISION PRACTICE

Proverbs 29:18: Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.

“When your values are clear to you, making decisions becomes easier.” —Roy E. Disney

The Annual Vision Practice is something we commit to do as a couple once a year. During this time together, we reflect on and evaluate what has happened over the past year and make strategic decisions and improvements for the coming year. In this practice, we will jump into an overview of the essential elements that make this time fun and productive.

Plan the right environment.

The Annual Vision Practice requires that we get away from the normal day-to-day to accomplish what we discussed earlier. Remember what Mark Batterson said: We have a “change of place, change of pace, change of perspective.”

We have found that a night or two at a hotel or Airbnb is the best place for these deeper conversations to happen without distractions. If the budget is too tight to afford a night or two away, we recommend talking to others in your community and church to see if there is a home, office space, or room that could be utilized. We have found that when you share the intent for the Annual Vision Practice with like-minded couples, most of the time, it will resonate, and there is a chance that they will have access to a second home, a rental

property, or office space that could be utilized for your time.

When do we do it?

This can be done any time of the year, but we've found the best time for us is between Christmas and Presidents' Day Weekend. One year, we had to bump it back four times, having it in April, so if you can't do it during the last or first part of the year, don't worry; it's just important that you fight and plan to make it a priority to do.

Timing matters. It's good to think about establishing a rhythm for meeting for this annual practice at the same time each year. Once you find the time that seems to work best for you both, you'll be a lot more consistent as you anticipate your family's Annual Vision Practice. Take the time to discuss and try to agree on specific dates for your upcoming Annual Vision Practice.

What exactly do we do during this time?

When we meet, we will be spending time primarily reflecting on the past year, assessing what has worked/not worked while strategically planning the year ahead.

When we get away, we try to kick off with a Shabbat dinner and spend time reflecting and celebrating together so that the following day we can fully dedicate ourselves to thinking clearly and planning with proper prioritization.

We then spend the first day looking back and the second day looking forward, so the schedule looks like:

Kickoff at night—we take time to look back individually and then have dinner to discuss together.

Day 1—We look back together: We take the time to reflect on our calendars, family culture, and the five dimensions (health, community, spirituality, finances, family) of our lives, and then celebrate what God has done in ourselves and in our marriage.

Day 2—We look forward together: By planning out the upcoming year, we take time to simplify, establish, improve, reorder, and commit our plans to the Lord.

The Annual Vision Practice is in an incredible rhythm to get into regardless of whether you have been married for 6 days or 35 years. Our mentors over the years and couples we deeply respect all have some form of a practice like this and have seen incredible fruit as each year has brought more intentionality, connection, and clarity for these couples. We can't encourage you enough to take out your calendar and set aside a time to do this together.

PRACTICE 4: INVESTING SPIRITUALLY IN YOUR SPOUSE

Colossians 1:10: So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

“Great marriages don’t happen by luck or by accident. They are the result of a consistent investment of time, thoughtfulness, forgiveness, affection, prayer, mutual respect, and a rock-solid commitment between a husband and a wife.” —Dave Willis

We all want to invest in our spouse spiritually, but knowing what to do can sometimes be confusing. Do we study a book of the Bible together, memorize scripture, have a weekly prayer time together, etc—the options at this time seem endless, but where really is a great place to start?

To invest spiritually in our spouse involves initiating conversations, attentively listening for insights into their relationship with Christ, and then encouraging them to take their next step in faith or obedience.

Taking the Initiative: Scheduling Quality Time

The first step is simple: initiate a conversation. We find a comfortable spot, grab our favorite drinks, and begin asking a few questions with our spouse. Whether it's at the kitchen table, on a neighborhood walk, or by the fireplace, choose an environment where you both feel comfortable. Remember, the goal is to listen attentively for clues about your spouse's relationship with Christ.

Active Listening: Understanding the Heart

Listening is more than hearing words—it's understanding the heart behind them. Jesus emphasized the importance of listening to the heart in Luke 6:45. By actively listening, you can grasp your spouse's thoughts, desires, and intentions. The "artist" illustration can guide your posture, encouraging sensitivity and empathy. In this illustration, we see two people: one is describing a specific scene or scenario (your spouse), and the other is recreating that image from what they have heard (the artist).

The concept of "the artist" involves observing with sensitivity, seeking to understand and interpret what is observed. Just as an artist pays attention to details, nuances, and textures before creating art, a listener approaches conversations with careful attention and sensitivity. The goal is to interpret the speaker's world accurately and empathetically, creating a deeper connection through understanding.

Asking Open-Ended Questions and Summarizing

As you begin to “paint the picture” of what your spouse is feeling, it's best to ask open-ended questions to prompt meaningful and thoughtful responses. These questions, starting with "How," "Why," or "What," encourage your spouse to share openly. Once they've spoken, summarize what you've heard to ensure understanding. Summaries focus on emotions and mood, not just facts, allowing for deeper connection and clarity.



Encouragement: Supporting the Next Step of Faith

Finally, after actively listening and painting the picture, we offer encouragement based on what we've both heard. It's important that we not use this time to tell them what to do or to give our personal opinions. Instead, we simply guide and encourage them toward the next step of faith aligned with God's Word. This could involve initiating challenging conversations, pursuing reconciliation, or combatting lies with the truth of God's word through scripture memorization. Whatever it may be, ensure it's centered on Jesus and His teachings.

By following these steps, we can deepen the spiritual connection with our spouse, fostering a supportive relationship rooted in Christ. Spiritual growth happens one step at a time, and your investment in each other's faith journey is invaluable.

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to investing spiritually in your spouse. We have put together a guide that goes further in-depth on this practice—Investing Spiritually in Your Spouse Guide.

PRACTICE 5: SCHEDULED INTIMACY

1 Corinthians 7:2-5: But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

You might be looking at this last practice of a thriving marriage and think, "Really? Scheduling our times of intimacy together? You're kidding, right? Sex is supposed to be spontaneous. Nobody schedules sex."

It's easy for married couples to let intimacy take a backseat in their relationship. And unfortunately, we have seen it happen time and time again. It is one of the first things to go when "drift" occurs in marriage. Whether it's navigating work, family responsibilities, or other obligations, finding time for physical and emotional connection can become a challenge. However, scheduling intimacy in marriage helps us to prioritize what's close to God's heart, which helps our marriage to thrive in more ways than one.

Side Note: We make this part of our Weekly Huddle conversation every week (just another reason why that practice is so important to do).

Here are a few reasons why scheduling sex as a practice is so important to a thriving marriage.

We are prioritizing our connection.

When we schedule times of intimacy, we as couples can prioritize our connection amidst the "busyness" of life. By intentionally setting aside time for physical and emotional closeness, we are sending this powerful message to each other: "You are important to me." This prioritization of intimacy fosters a sense of value, appreciation, and commitment in the relationship, laying a foundation for deeper connection and trust.

Eliminating "The Ask"

In every marriage, there's a difference in the level of desire for physical intimacy between partners. One spouse may have a higher drive and regularly initiates sex, while the other may be less inclined to do so. This can lead to feelings of frustration and rejection, particularly for the partner with a higher sex drive, who may feel like they are constantly having to request intimacy.

By establishing a simple schedule for sex within marriage, couples can alleviate the pressure of having to ask or deny sex constantly. While this schedule still allows for spontaneity, it provides assurance to each partner that their desires are important and worth keeping as a core commitment. We encourage you to schedule a balance between the desires of both partners, creating a rhythm that meets each other's needs and promotes mutual satisfaction.

Creates Anticipation

Scheduling intimacy increases anticipation for both of us. It's like when you have a fun vacation date circled on the calendar; we are eagerly awaiting the moment when we can

jump on the plane, enjoy fun adventures, eat good food, and spend extended time away together making new memories. Viewing sex as a form of play within your marriage, as God intended it to be, adds an element of excitement and playfulness to the anticipation. This becomes your private playground, where you can explore and delight in each other.

Scheduling Intimacy Builds Trust

What we have also seen is that scheduling intimacy also builds trust. When we commit to prioritizing each other, we're honoring our word and demonstrating our commitment to each other. When we schedule our weekly times of intimacy, we make sure to do it in pencil and not in permanent marker. What that means is that circumstances can come up (sickness, long day at work, kids activities) that won't allow us to be fully present with each other. What's key here is that we communicate openly with each other without an attitude of disappointment or regret and work to reschedule our time together. We need to have clear expectations of each other and know when the next time will be.

Scheduling intimacy in marriage strengthens our bond with each other in so many ways. It's not about removing spontaneity or turning intimacy into a chore; it's about prioritizing each other and investing in the sustainable health of our relationship. We can deepen our connection and love for each other by setting aside dedicated time for physical oneness.

CONCLUSION

We trust that this guide has provided you with some valuable insights into the essential practices that underpin a thriving marriage. Our earnest prayer, and that of the couples praying for you in the Spark Collective, is that this guide has equipped you with practical wisdom and inspired you to embark on a journey of making an intentional investment in your marriage, guided by the teachings of Jesus.

As you and your spouse seek to follow Jesus, may you experience His transformative love and grace permeating every aspect of your marriage. May His presence be the cornerstone of your marriage, anchoring you through life's joys and challenges.

If you feel called or inspired to learn more about building your marriage foundation on the bedrock of Jesus, we invite you to explore our Marriage Foundations course. This free eight-week journey offers practical insights and biblical principles to build a Christ-centered marriage.

Should you have any questions or require further assistance along your marital journey, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. Whether through email at mikeandholly@sparkdiscipleship.com or via direct message on Instagram, we are here to support and encourage you every step of the way.

May your marriage continue to be a testament to God's faithfulness and a reflection of His

A couple is walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a forest. The man is on the left, wearing a blue jacket and khaki pants. The woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored sweater and dark pants. They are holding hands. The background shows a dense forest of evergreen trees under a twilight sky with some clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

ARE YOU READY TO BUILD AN EXTRAORDINARY MARRIAGE THAT IS ROOTED IN CHRIST?

We would love to jump on a call with you and hear your story, identify the biggest opportunities for you, and even lay out a personalized roadmap to help you align your marriage, family, and work with a foundation built to last.

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