

CHAPTER TWO

Uniqueness and Acceptance in Marriage

Chapter Purpose: This chapter helps couples recognize that marriage is not the elimination of difference, but the faithful practice of understanding, honoring, and accepting one another as uniquely created by God. The goal is not to make your partner more like you. The goal is to learn how to love your partner well while becoming more humble, curious, patient, and emotionally mature together.

Counselor/Pastor Note: As you work through this chapter, slow down enough to notice whether you are listening to understand or listening to correct. Couples often struggle not because they are too different, but because they interpret difference as rejection, disrespect, or threat. Healthy premarital work helps couples learn the difference between a preference, a pattern, a wound, and a value.

Your partner is not you. He or she is “other,” created in God’s image, not yours. He or she has a right to be other, to be treated and respected as other.

Faith Integration Reflection: Genesis 1:27 reminds us that both man and woman are created in the image of God. This means your future spouse is not a project to fix, a mirror to reflect your preferences, or an extension of your personality. Your partner is a person to honor. Christian marriage asks each spouse to practice reverence, humility, and sacrificial love toward someone who may think, feel, process, and respond differently.

Differences. How do you learn to adjust to the differences in your partner without losing who you are? How do you learn to appreciate another person’s uniqueness? How can you learn to live with this person who is so different from you?

A helpful question for couples is not, “How do I get my fiancé to stop being different?” A better question is, “How can I understand what this difference means, where it came from, and how we can respond to it with respect?”

“When you marry, do you end up marrying someone who is your opposite or someone who is similar?” The answer is “yes.” It’s both. There will be similarities as well as differences, and you have to learn to adjust to both. Think of it like this:

We marry for our similarities. We stay together for our differences.

Similarities satiate; differences attract.

Differences are rarely the cause of conflict in marriage; the problems arise from our similarities. Differences are the occasion, similarities are the cause.

The differences may serve as the triggering event, as the issue for debate, but our similarities create the conflict between us.

The very same differences that initially drew us together later pull us apart and still later may draw us near again. Differences first attract, then irritate, then frustrate, then illuminate and finally may unite us. Those traits that intrigue in courtship, amuse in early marriage, begin to chafe in time and infuriate in conflicts of middle marriages; but maturation begins to change their meaning and the uniqueness of the other person becomes prized, even in the very differences that were primary irritants.⁶

Clinical Insight: Many recurring couple conflicts are not simply about the surface issue. They are often about the meaning attached to the issue. One person’s quietness may be interpreted as rejection. One person’s planning may be interpreted as control. One person’s spontaneity may be interpreted as

irresponsibility. Premarital counseling helps couples ask, “What story am I telling myself about my partner’s difference?” before reacting as if that story is the truth.

Differences abound in marriage. Generally, they can be divided into two types. The first includes those that can’t be changed, such as age, race, looks, home, and cultural background. Your personal body metabolism will affect where you want the temperature in the home, whether you wake up bright and eager, ready to face the day, or whether you need an hour to get both eyes focusing. These characteristics cannot be changed.

But the other category includes those differences that can be changed: personal habits in the bathroom or at the dinner table, whether you like to get up early and your spouse enjoys sleeping late, or whether one likes going out three nights a week and the other prefers watching television at home.

Couple Discernment: Before trying to change a difference, identify which kind of difference it is. Some differences must be accepted. Some can be negotiated. Some need healing. Some need boundaries. Some simply need appreciation.

Use the table below to discuss the difference honestly and kindly.

Difference	Can this be changed?	What does this difference mean to each of us?	How can we respond with love and wisdom?

Think about this: “If you plan to marry, it is certain that you have a preconceived fantasy of your ideal mate or the perfect marriage. After a while you will begin to realize that your fantasy and the person you have married will begin to diverge sharply. At that point you may embark upon a reform program, forgetting that only God can make a tree. You misconstrued the words of the wedding ceremony ‘and the two shall become one’ to mean that your mate should become like you and your fantasy. You want to become one in likes, preferences, interests, hobbies, ideas, even reactions and feelings: Yours! The oneness in marriage is not similarity or sameness in matters relating to ideas or feelings but oneness in understanding. Any attempt to mold our partners in an effort to match them to our fantasies is arrogance on our part and an insult to them. While it is true that we can never mold or remake another person, we can ‘allow’ him [or her] to change.”⁴⁷

Marriage Growth Principle: Oneness does not mean sameness. Biblical oneness is covenantal unity. It is the commitment to move together, worship together, forgive together, grow together, and build a shared life together without erasing either person’s God-given uniqueness.

Scripture Connection: Ephesians 5:21 calls believers to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ” (ESV). Mutual submission is not passivity. It is the willing choice to consider how your words, habits, expectations, and reactions affect the person you are called to love.

SIMILARITIES

How are my fiancé and I similar?

Added Reflection: Which similarities make you feel safe, known, or connected? Which similarities could create tension because you both want control, both avoid conflict, both react strongly, or both expect the other person to understand without explanation?

DIFFERENCES

How are my fiancé and I different?

Added Reflection: Which differences are easy for you to accept, and which differences make you feel anxious, criticized, unseen, or misunderstood?

EFFECT

How can these differences and similarities complement one another in our marriage?

Which of the differences have you thanked God for?

Prayer Prompt: Lord, help me see my future spouse not merely through my expectations, but through Your love, patience, and grace. Teach me to honor what You are forming in this person.

The instruction on right living in Ephesians 4:2 can be applied to the marriage relationship. “Living as becomes you, with complete lowliness of mind (humility) and meekness (unselfishness, gentleness, mildness), with patience, bearing with one another and making allowances because you love one another” (AMP).

Look at the last part of the verse: “making allowances because you love one another.” List six specific examples of how this portion can be applied in your future marriage relationship. Try to think of these in relation to your differentness.

Faith Integration Note: Making allowances does not mean excusing sin, ignoring harmful behavior, or abandoning wise boundaries. It means choosing humility and patience in areas of preference, personality, background, and growth. Grace is not the absence of truth. Grace is truth expressed with love, wisdom, and patience.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Differences in Marriage: The Potential for Growth and Enhancement

Yes, every person who marries has characteristics similar to the one he or she marries. But he or she also has many that are different. Different ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving are part of marital adjustment. Differentness is important because it holds out the promise of need fulfillment for each person.

It is important to remember that one of the main motivating factors toward marriage is the need to feel complete because of what the other person has to offer. Consciously or unconsciously people choose others who can help them feel complete.

Important Clarification: Your spouse can bless, strengthen, and complement you, but your spouse cannot become your Savior. A healthy Christian marriage recognizes that emotional connection matters deeply, while also remembering that identity, ultimate worth, and deepest security are found in Christ. Couples who expect a spouse to meet every emotional, spiritual, relational, and personal need often place a burden on marriage that marriage was never designed to carry.

On one hand, this innate differentness contains the seeds for hurt and disruption. Why? The answer is quite simple. We are threatened by the differences in our spouse. We are afraid that we might have to adjust our way of thinking and doing things. We also may believe that “if it’s different, it’s wrong.”

Counseling Lens: The phrase “different means wrong” is one of the quiet assumptions that damages many relationships. Couples grow when they learn to replace judgment with curiosity. Curiosity sounds like, “Help me understand why this matters to you.” Judgment sounds like, “Why can’t you just do it my way?”

Many problems occur because of the lack of tolerance for differences of attitude or opinions in the marital relationship. You will be vaguely aware of differences when you marry. You probably don’t say now that your partner is different, more likely “unique.” But after a while you will say...different. At first you may try to accommodate. You tolerate, overlook, or deny differences to avoid conflict. Then you may try to eliminate the differences by demanding, pressuring, or manipulating your spouse.

Warning Signs to Discuss Before Marriage:

- I regularly assume my way is the mature way.
- I become defensive when my fiancé sees something differently.
- I use Scripture, family expectations, money, silence, anger, or affection to pressure my fiancé into agreement.
- I confuse unity with compliance.
- I avoid hard conversations until resentment builds.

If any of these are present, do not panic. Instead, name the pattern, bring it into prayer, discuss it with humility, and practice a healthier response with your counselor or pastor.

But eventually you will learn to appreciate the differences because you discover that they are necessary and indispensable. And because of this, you will be able to celebrate them. You’ll delight in them. You’ll welcome them. You’ll encourage their growth. As you go through this process, you will discover that you didn’t marry the wrong person.⁸

Couple Exercise: Each partner should complete the sentence, “One difference in you that I want to learn to appreciate more is _____ because _____.” Then the listening partner should respond only with, “Thank you for seeing that in me.” Do not correct, explain, or debate during this exercise.

Consider these thoughts: “In the midst of the marital struggle the honeymoon dream vanishes, and the despair over the old relationship comes up for reexamination. Suddenly each spouse turns his eyes away from the partner, and looks inwardly and asks, ‘What am I doing to my partner? What is wrong with me? What am I misunderstanding? What must I do to rescue this marriage?’

“If honestly asked, the answers are not far behind: ‘I really married my wife because of her difference. It is not my job to make her over, but rather to discover and to value that difference. But before I can do that I must accept my difference, and I really need her to help me discover my uniqueness. My task is not to mold her into a beautiful vase, but to participate with her to discover that beautiful vase even as we discover it in me.

“How arrogant of me to think I could shape another human being! How humble it makes me to realize that I need to yield to another and thereby be changed! Our relationship will change both of us, in a process of being shaped into a form far more beautiful than either could imagine.”⁵⁹

“We try to change people to conform to our ideas of how they should be. So does God. But there the similarity ends. Our ideas of what the other person should do or how he should act may be an improvement or an imprisonment. We may be setting the other person free of behavior patterns that are restricting his development, or we may be simply chaining him up in another behavioral bondage.”¹⁰

Discernment Question: Am I asking my fiancé to grow in a way that leads to love, health, holiness, maturity, and mutual flourishing, or am I trying to make my fiancé easier for me to manage?

In reality, we marry the right person, far more right than we can know. In a mysterious, intuitive, perhaps instinctive fashion we are drawn by both similarities and differences, by needs and anxieties, by dreams and fears to choose our complement, our reflection in another.

As we discover that we knew more than we knew when we chose whom we chose, appreciation begins to break into a gentle flame. In appreciation, we discover that people who marry each other reflect each other. There is a similar level of maturity, a parallel set of self-understandings and self-acceptance in most couples choosing each other. The two express their self-image and self-valuation in the person selected.

People who marry each other complete each other in a puzzling yet pronounced way. The missing is supplied, the imbalanced is brought into equilibrium, the dormant is enriched by what is dominant in the other.¹⁶¹

The adventure of marriage is discovering who your partner really is. The excitement is in finding out who your partner will become.

Christian Marriage Application: In marriage, God often uses your spouse’s difference to reveal places where you need patience, courage, tenderness, repentance, or greater self-awareness. This does not make your spouse your enemy. It may mean your spouse is one of the primary people God uses to help you become more like Christ.

Family History and Interview Questions

(Adapted from Finding Your Perfect Mate by H. Norman Wright, Harvest House.)

Use the following questions to discover as much as you can about your partner.

How to Use These Questions: Do not rush through these like an interview or checklist. Take turns. Practice listening without correcting. When your partner shares something painful, respond with tenderness rather

than problem-solving. Try saying, “Thank you for trusting me with that,” or “That helps me understand you better.”

- What special memories do you have about your childhood?
- How did you get along with each of your parents? What were they like? What did you like and dislike about your parents?
- What were your hurts and disappointments as a child?
- What were your hobbies and favorite games?
- How did you usually get into trouble?
- How did you usually try to get out of trouble?
- What did you enjoy about school activities?
- What pets did you have? Which were your favorites and why?
- What did you dream about doing when you were older?
- Did you like yourself as a child? Explain.
- Did you like yourself as a teenager? Explain.
- What were your talents and special abilities?
- What awards and achievements did you win?
- Did you have a nickname?
- Who were your close friends? Where are they today?
- Describe the area where you grew up, people, neighborhood, etc.
- What was your spiritual life like as a child? As an adolescent?
- Who were the Christians in your family?
- What were you afraid of? Do you have any of those fears today?
- How did you get along with your brothers and/or sisters? If you had none, which relatives were you closest to?
- What parts of your childhood would you like to relive? Why?
- What do you remember from your first day of school?
- Did you enjoy school? Why or why not? What was your favorite grade, and who were your favorite teachers?
- Who was your first date?
- Who were your other dates or boyfriends/girlfriends? What did you like and dislike about each one?
- Where did you go on dates?
- How did you feel when you liked someone and that person didn’t care for you?
- How has being an adult changed your life?
- Compare yourself now to when you were 10.
- What have been your greatest disappointments? How have you handled them? What have you learned from them?
- At what age did you first like the opposite sex?
- What was your birth order in your family?
- Did you have enough money in your youth? Enough food and clothing?
- Who educated you in sex? What were your sexual experiences? What is your standard for sexual expression in your life now?
- What are your political views?
- What do you enjoy reading? Watching on TV?
- Have you ever had a child? Do you want children?

- What is your first memory?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Describe your education and job experiences. What were your emotional reactions to jobs, fellow employees, and bosses? What are your ambitions?
- What are your natural gifts? What do you consider your strong points? Weak points?
- What is your medical history?
- What is your favorite holiday, type of music, television program, and pastime?
- While growing up, did you think of marrying someday?
- Who are the five most important people in your life?
- Which Christian leaders or writers have influenced you?
- Where would you like to live? What country, state, city, house, and/or apartment?
- What are your views on aging?
- Describe the best year of your life.

Additional Faith and Family-of-Origin Questions:

- What did love look like in your home growing up?
- How did your family handle conflict, apology, forgiveness, and repair?
- When someone was hurt in your family, was comfort offered, ignored, minimized, or punished?
- What did your family teach you about marriage, gender roles, money, affection, faith, and emotional expression?
- What parts of your family story do you want to carry into marriage, and what parts do you want to redeem, heal, or change?
- How do you hope our home will reflect Christ differently than what either of us experienced growing up?

Daily Log History Sheet

To assist you in becoming better acquainted with your potential partner, complete the following daily activity log on a separate sheet of paper with as much specific information as possible. It may be helpful to keep this with you at all times during a typical day. At the end of each hour, write down exactly what you did during that time. You will need to do this twice, once for a weekday and once for a day off.

1. When do you wake up?
2. When do you get up?
3. What steps do you take to get ready for the day? Example: Do you shower first or eat first? How much time do you need getting ready in the bathroom? How much time do you take preparing breakfast? Do you eat sitting down or on the run? Do you read the paper in the morning, have devotions, etc.? In other words, indicate your normal procedures and how much time you spend for each task.
4. As you drive to wherever you're going (work, school, etc.), do you enjoy the solitude or would you rather talk to someone? If you listen to the radio, what do you listen to?
5. Now that you've got the basic idea of what we're looking for, indicate what you do each hour of the day. Be sure to describe what you do on breaks, lunch, etc.
6. As you drive home, are you thinking about what went on during the day or what you're going to do in the evening? What do you enjoy doing for the first hour when you get home?
7. Describe in detail dinner preparations, what and where you like to eat, and what you do in the evening. When you get ready for bed, where do you put your clothes from this day? Do you prepare your clothes for

the next day or wait until the morning? Do you go to sleep with the radio or TV on? Do you like it completely dark and quiet or do you leave a light on?

Please feel free to add any details or any pertinent information that will help your partner have a better idea of your daily lifestyle. Be sure you follow the same procedure for your day off, such as Saturday.

Once you have both completed these forms, share them with one another and discuss how being married will change your daily procedures.

Added Couple Discussion: After comparing your daily logs, identify three areas where your rhythms naturally fit and three areas where your rhythms may require kindness, negotiation, or compromise. Examples may include bedtime, morning routines, meal expectations, quiet time, screen use, chores, Sabbath rest, exercise, family visits, or personal space.

Practical Skill: Use “I” language when discussing daily routines. Instead of saying, “You are messy,” try, “I feel calmer when the bedroom is picked up before bed. Can we talk about a rhythm that works for both of us?”

Final Questions

1. If you are bothered by the uniqueness of your fiancé, ask yourself, “What will it be like to be married to a person like me in so many ways? What will it be like being married to someone so different than I am? Will I like it?”
2. In what way will the presence of Jesus Christ in your life help you adjust to differences in your future marriage?

Additional Final Questions:

1. What difference in my fiancé do I need to stop treating as a threat?
2. Where do I need to grow in humility, patience, curiosity, or gentleness?
3. What expectation have I brought into this relationship that may need to be surrendered or revised?
4. How can we create a marriage culture where both of us feel known, valued, and safe to grow?
5. What would it look like for us to practice Ephesians 4:2 during conflict this week?

To assist you in fully discovering your uniqueness, as well as differences, Pastor/Therapist Rodney A. Fry might administer the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). You can save 20 years of frustration by discovering now how God uniquely created you and how you can learn to be compatible with your spouse. The MBTI helps you

better understand your personality. It is the most accurate and insightful tool available to measure personality characteristics.

Counselor Note: Personality inventories can be helpful tools for conversation, but they should not be used to label, limit, excuse, or stereotype a person. The goal is not to say, “This is just how I am.” The goal is to say, “This helps me understand myself better so I can love you more wisely.”

It is also important to expand your understanding by reading about who you are. A book designed to help you understand personality differences, gender differences, and learning style differences is *Communication: Key to Your Marriage* by H. Norman Wright.⁷

Pastor/Therapist Rodney A. Fry recommends several books to read prior/post to marriage.

- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman and Nan Silver
- *Eight Dates: Essential Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* by Douglas Abrams, John M. Gottman, and Julie Gottman
- *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend

Suggested Couple Practice Before the Next Session: Choose one difference you identified in this chapter. During the week, each of you should intentionally notice one way that difference could become a strength in your marriage. Come prepared to share what you noticed without criticism or correction.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach us to love with humility, patience, and truth. Help us receive one another as gifts rather than projects. Show us where we need to grow, where we need to listen, and where we need to surrender our pride. Let our differences become places of understanding, not division. Shape our future marriage into a covenant that reflects Your grace, faithfulness, and love. Amen.

References and Source Notes

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