Honor Thy (Very Flawed) Father and Mother

July 30, 2013

Someone asked me about how to resolve the biblical command to "Honor thy father and mother" (Ex. 20:12) with the fact that these people may have had huge and damaging flaws. I suggested googling the phrase "honoring your parents" for some insight. Below are some links I found helpful.

But as I told her, one aspect of honoring flawed parents is to understand that the best (or even only) way you might be able to honor them is from a distance, emotionally and physically. You can give yourself permission to do that.

To give them honor means showing (not necessarily *feeling*) respect, letting them know you are listening and considering what they say. (And it does not necessarily mean following through!) To give them honor means being civil and kind in your dealings with them. It does not mean trusting them. It does not mean placing yourself in harm's way. It means forgiving them, so that you are not carrying and paying for the emotional baggage of their treatment of you. And please remember that forgiveness is given, but trust is earned, so it's entirely possible that you can release the woundings you sustained from them without ever, ever trusting them with your heart, because they don't deserve your trust.

Honoring flawed parents means you have healthy boundaries so that you know where you end and they begin. It means you learn how to protect yourself so that they can't steamroll over you; it also means you have realistic expectations about what they can and cannot give you or do for/to you. (You may need some help adjusting your expectations.) For instance, in our family there is a family member who has never, ever said the words

"thank you." I mean, not even if you pass the salt, or do something they specifically asked! (I think this qualifies as "flawed," don't you?) It is unrealistic to expect that to change. It is an exercise in futility to expect anything different than a lifelong pattern of non-communication. Honoring this person means letting go of the futile hope to ever hear something as simple as "thank you," much less the more profound "I'm proud of you" or even "I love you"! Honoring this person means letting go of unrealistic expectations so we don't set ourselves up for continued disappointment and heartache. (An excellent book is *Boundaries* by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud, and I taught a 7-week study on this book which is available here on Bible.org.)

Finally, let me share with you the insight of Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

> *"To honor our parents means to be thankful for for their existence and to respect their actual role as givers of life in the sequence of human existence. Of course in order to honor them in this way we need to be thankful for our own existence too. But we also will usually need to have pity on them. For, even if they are good people, it is almost always true that they have been quite wrong in many respects, and possibly still are.*
>
> *"Commonly those who have experienced great antagonism with their parents are only able to be thankful for their existence and honor them, as they deeply need to, after the parents have grown old. Then it is possible to pity them, to have mercy on them. And that opens the door to honoring them. With a certain sadness, perhaps, but also with joy and peace at least. One of the greatest gifts of The Kingdom Among Us is the healing of the parent-child relation, 'turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers' (Mal. 4:6)."*

Honor My Mother And Father? How Should I Treat My Abusive Parents?
www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/questions/parentingandfamily/honormymotherandfather.html

What Does It Mean to Honor Your Parents? (in this case, when a parent has dementia)
http://www.newhopenow.com/ask/honor_parents.html

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/honor_thy_very_flawed_father_and_mother

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LET IT GO

Tweet

January 1, 2013

Most people's New Year's resolutions involve things to add or incorporate into your life: losing weight, reading through the Bible, decluttering your house, filing your income tax before April 15. (I hereby make a public commitment on that last one. Feel free to ask me about it.)

But some people don't need to add anything else, they need to LET GO.

Judy's ex-husband made some horrifically sinful, deceived, foolish choices that culminated with sex-change surgery. For months she has been tormenting herself daily with false guilt: if she had loved him more, if she had changed this or that, he wouldn't have mutilated himself, now preening before a mirror

at how beautiful he thinks he is. She needs to let go of the fantasy that it was within her power to fix him or change him. She needs to let go of the refusal to accept reality.

Polly is married to a difficult man. Neither one knew the other well when they married after a short internet courtship. She believed that marriage was an endless supply of unconditional love, acceptance and conversation. He believed that marriage was an endless supply of sex multiple times a day. Fifteen years later, she sees women she thinks are released from their sin-wracked marriages and doesn't understand why God keeps telling her to stay put and trust Him. She needs to let go of the fantasy of an easy out that would solve her problems.

Diane dances at the brink of disaster, focusing on how wonderful it would feel to nuzzle and cuddle the other women she's attracted to. When she crosses the line into flirting, touching inappropriately, and making suggestive small talk, she destroys one friendship after another. She needs to let go of the resentment that God says same-sex relationships are wrong and let go of the fantasy that if He would just say it's okay, she could cross the line with impunity and she could get what she's sure would make her happy. Finally.

Colleen bought into the lie that she could get away with cheating on her husband. When she came to her senses after the divorce was final and her husband had custody of their children, she begged for forgiveness and reconciliation. But he had given himself permission to move on, and refused to consider it. Now she beats herself up regularly: "I can't do this! I want my family back! What can't I have my family back?" She also needs to let go of her refusal to accept reality, pushing back with, "I don't want reality! Why can't I have my family back?"

Brae carries deep wounds from her family. Unrelenting shame often erupts in rage, but Brae cannot imagine being able to

express her rage at her shaming parents. So she directs it at herself through life-threatening self-injury. She needs to let go of the belief that watching her blood flow into the bathtub is a solution to the emotions that overwhelm her. And she needs to let go of the belief that hurting herself is the only way to release the rage inside.

We all cling to wrong beliefs and sometimes demonic deceptions that we trust to make life work, but they are our blind spots. We can no more identify those false idols than a fish can tell you what water is.

That's why one of the best prayers we can pray is, *Lord, show me where I'm being deceived. Reveal my idols to me. Show me what I'm trusting to make life work instead of You. Shine a light on where I need to let go of every thought, every habit, every burden, every encumbrance that so easily entangles me* (Heb. 12:1).

And then LET GO of whatever He shows us.

Often, God uses other people who are "doing life" with us, who don't have blinders on like we do, to point out the self-sabotaging or dangerous or foolish things we cling to-or which we allow to cling to us. This is yet another reason He wants us to live in community, where we know and are known and people will speak the truth in love to us.

When they point out something that is a self-sabotaging or dangerous or foolish encumbrance, we need LET IT GO.

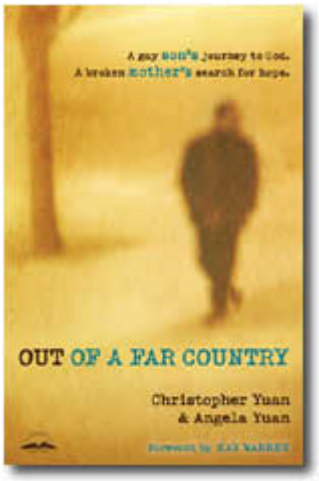
Lord, I need You to help me LET GO of whatever You convict me of. In Your strength, I set it down, relinquishing it into Your hands. Receive this thing as an act of worship. I can't do it on my own.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/let_it_go

The Power of a Mother's Prayers

Oct. 23, 2012

Jesus' most famous parable in Luke 15 tells the story of a rebellious young man usually dubbed "the Prodigal Son" who demanded his share of his father's inheritance while his dad was still alive, shameful enough, but then went off into "the far country" to squander it on riotous living. A modern-day prodigal and his mother have written their story, telling parallel stories from each one's perspective. The son's "far country" included drug dealing, living it up as a party animal, and gay promiscuity leading to a diagnosis of AIDS. But God brought both mother and son out of the far country to Himself.



Because I am privileged to walk with a number of people out of their own personal "far countries" of homosexuality, *Out of a Far Country* was a compelling read for me. But because I am also a mother, Angela Yuan's testimony of trusting Christ and then entrusting her beloved son into His hands again and again as a faithful prayer warrior, was deeply encouraging as well.

I was reminded of several lessons on prayer through this book.

First, *it's better to pray big than to try to micro-manage the outcome*. Angela continued to relinquish her own desires for her son to the Lord's better plan, which was for Christopher to walk in his true identity as a beloved child of a loving heavenly Father. When her son was angry and rebellious, she

kept her eyes focused on the Lord instead of Christopher. She writes, “I started fasting and praying, asking God for wisdom and discernment. I had no idea what it would look like, but I had a clear sense that Leon and I needed to step aside and get out of the way so that God could work in Christopher’s life.”

When Christopher was three months away from graduating from dental school, he learned he was expelled because of his foolish, illegal and sinful choices. His parents went to meet with the dean. Both the dean and the son expected the senior Yuans to put pressure on the school, but instead, Angela said, “Actually, it’s not important that Christopher becomes a dentist. What’s important is that Christopher becomes a Christ follower. Leon and I have flown down to Louisville to tell you”—I looked over at Leon—”that we will support whatever decision you make. I only pray that my son will turn to God.”

And he did. It didn’t happen until he was incarcerated for his drug dealing, but God answered the far more important prayer.


Angela's Prayer Closet

Second, *let go of your time line*. We are such impatient people! We start praying and we want God to answer in the next day. Or week. Or month. But while He is at work behind the scenes, unscrambling the mess we tend to make of our lives, we don’t think He is listening or answering. Angela prayed for years for God to bring Christopher out of the far country, and when He did, it was glorious. Christopher went from prison, where he met the Lord Jesus, to Moody Bible Institute, and then graduate school at Wheaton College, and now has a worldwide ministry telling his/their story and bringing great glory to God in the process.

Third, *prayer is essential for the spiritual battles against*

the forces of darkness. Christopher's choices to engage in ongoing sexual sin, drug use and wild living went hand-in-hand with a spirit of rebellion and a strong delusion. Both of these involve demons, because his sinful choices opened up doorways to demonic influence. The Yuans' book provides plenty of examples of the spiritual blindness that resulted. But Angela's faithful time in the Word of God and intercessory prayer tore down the strongholds that held her son captive to his fleshly desires and his spiritual bondage. She turned a shower stall into her prayer closet, where she spent literally hours every day immersing herself in the Bible and prayer.



Fourth, *remain thankful*. When Christopher called his parents to tell them that he had been arrested and was in jail, Angela recognized this as the answer to her frequent prayer: *Lord, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son out of that far country to you.* For the first time in years, she knew that where her son was, and that he was safe. She grabbed a length of adding machine tape and wrote down that blessing. And then, as God unfolded His glorious plan for drawing Christopher to Himself and then redeeming the pain of his rebellion, she kept adding to the blessing list over the years. When I heard her tell her story at an Exodus International conference several years ago, she held up her rolled-up blessings list and let it drop: it's about six feet long! Christopher tells me it's almost full on the second side as well. Choosing to focus on the ways in which God continues to bless us in the midst of suffering, developing an attitude of gratitude, keeps us from losing heart in a hard situation.

Fifth, *persistent prayer changes the one praying*. Desperation for her son drove Angela Yuan to an incredible intimacy with her Savior. Her daily time in His word and her gift of intercessory prayer drew her heart ever closer to Him. *Out of*

the Far Country isn't just a story of a mother's and son's spiritual journey, it is an inspiration to "always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).



This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_power_of_a_mothers_prayers

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Mothering Little Men from Mars

One of the greatest privileges of my life—right after saying "yes" to Jesus and "I do" to my husband—has been mothering my two sons, now 20 and 22.

Several years ago, my husband Ray and I started researching gender differences and discovered the truths in John Gray's mega-bestseller, *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*. It didn't take long for us to realize that we didn't have gender-free *children*; we had little men from Mars! And then I started realizing why I sometimes unnecessarily frustrated my kids and why we didn't connect all the time—because I'm from Venus and

they're from Mars, and there is a HUGE gender gap between masculine and feminine! John Gray didn't discover it; God created it, with great delight and a big smile on His face.

For example, boys, being male, are wired to be **self-reliant**. They act like they get extra brownie points for doing something on their own. One of my son Curt's first whole sentences was, "***I*** do it!" For boys, accepting help is perceived as weakness. For us relationally-oriented ladies, offering and accepting help is a way to make a heart-connection with another person. So when I would say, "Let Mommy help you," they would be offended and I never knew why. If I could do it over again, I would tell them, "Let's see if you can do it on your own. If it doesn't work, I'll be glad to help."

One of the most powerful lessons I've learned about mothering boys is that the male mind is linear, life is handled only one piece at a time. This impacts both their thinking and activity.

Males tend to think on one thing at a time. I now know that when my husband or sons are reading, it's not safe to start a conversation until I get their attention and they're looking at me. I used to frustrate the dickens out of my sons on soccer game days when they were dressed in their soccer uniforms, their soccer bags were packed, they had their game face on, and there were 15 minutes left before we had to leave. And I, being the ever-efficient one, would try to get them to use that time wisely to clean up the living room or fold laundry. They never, ever, cooperated willingly! And now I know why. I'd love to go back and change that part of mothering.

This linear approach also has a major impact on their activity. They are created to **do one thing at a time** before moving on to the next event. If I wanted their attention while they were watching TV, I would have to physically stand in

front of the screen to break their attention and have them look at me. I, on the other hand, am a natural multi-tasker, because if mothers couldn't do more than one thing at a time, humanity wouldn't last more than one generation. So I would have conversations with my boys or direct homework while doing the dishes or cooking or a multitude of other things. I finally realized that because my kids can't multi-task, they never believed that I was actually paying attention to them if my hands were busy.

Knowing this, I have learned that when they start to tell me something, I put down whatever I'm doing, turn my body to face them squarely, and give them my full physical attention. It's been wonderful to see the difference; they now *feel* I am truly listening. I've shared this insight with several of my friends, who report that it's made a major difference with the boys in their homes as well. Their girls never gave it a thought, because girls intuitively know you can wash dishes and talk at the same time!

Where girls are more verbal, boys are usually **more physical**. I have a friend who wanted her boys to always move quietly and slowly like girls, and had a "no rough-housing" rule in the house. This is the fast track to killing a boy's heart, because boys were made to wrestle and tumble and be loud. This isn't a design defect. It's the way God was pleased to make them. While it's not good to break lamps, of course, boys need to be able to MOVE while their moms smile and let them be who they were made to be.

Another thing I'd go back and change is trying to pry conversations out of my sons. I didn't understand that females naturally generate three times as many words as males, and we talk to build community and knit hearts together. Boys and **men talk for one reason: to convey facts and information**. If they don't have anything to convey, they don't talk. A wise counselor finally explained to me that if I waited for my sons to initiate conversations on their timetable, I would get what

my heart longed for. I also learned that one of my son's love languages is physical touch, and if I would go in at the beginning or the end of the day and silently rub his back, he would often start talking. It's amazing what meaningful conversations can happen at bedtime when the kids are trying to forestall sleep!

John Gray says, and it's my experience as well, that a **man's primary need is to be *respected***. It starts when they're very small boys. When a boy's mother shows him respect, especially when it's backed by a father's respect, that fills boys' "respect buckets." Because they are made in the image of God, that alone makes them infinitely valuable and precious and worthy of great respect and dignity. I showed them respect by giving them significant choices, and honoring those choices. It started with choosing their clothes and making various school-related choices, and grew into choices like room colors and what sports they would pursue. I showed them respect by listening to them and not interrupting, by not being sarcastic, and by not saying shaming and condemning things. My son has commented that it's important to remember that kids are "little MEN from Mars," and not talk down to them as inferior beings simply because they are not adults. He is glad we didn't do it, but it really bothers him when he sees grown-ups do it to kids.

One last thing I've learned lately is the importance of supporting and cherishing our children's gender to help them grow into healthy adults. Little **boys need to know that being a boy is a good thing**, and of course the same holds true for girls. After sharing this with a group of mothers of preschoolers, one friend took her little boy for a walk down to the lake. Along the way she said, "Parker, let's look for frogs and toads. Mommy is so glad God made you a little boy so you could like yucky things like frogs and toads." When they got back to the house, his grandmother asked, "So how was your walk?" and Parker said, "Mommy's glad that I'm a boy because I

like yucky things like frogs and toads."

When my first son was born, my mother told me that mothers and sons, and fathers and daughters, have a very special relationship. She was so very right, and I thank the Lord for His good, *so* very good, gift of my sons.

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What Not to Say: Adoption

The power of words to hurt and offend seems limitless, as Sandra Glahn and I have learned both in life and in the comments from our blogs about "what not to say." [See Infertility: People Say the Dumbest Things and What Not to Say When Someone is Grieving.]

I came across a new list of What Not to Say About Adoption from a single dad blogger. With some editing, here is his contribution:

Single Dad Laughing's Guide to Adoption Etiquette.

> **1. Never, ever, ever, ask how much a child costs.** This includes the phrase, "How much did you pay for him?" First of all, it's none of your business. Second of all, if you're interested in adoption, research it through the appropriate channels. Speak with an adoption agency. Adoptive parents don't purchase children. They simply pay legal fees and agency fees. Just like biological parents pay hospital and doctor bills. Don't turn the child into nothing more than a commodity.

2. Never ask if a celebrity inspired the adoption. Believe it or not, Tom Cruise, Connie Chung, and Angelina Jolie did not convince me one way or the other in the biggest decision of my life. Are you serious?

3. Never ask "Where is his real dad?" Forget the fact that it will hurt *my* feelings. How do you think it will affect my son's feelings to feel like I'm not a real dad to him? Adoptive parents *are* real parents. The term you're looking for is "birth mother" or "birth father."

4. Don't say things like, "As soon as you adopt you're going to get pregnant" when you find out somebody is adopting. First of all, there are usually many, many years of pain and financial burden strapped to infertility, treatments, and heartache. Do you really think that what you're saying will help them? Secondly, while it is funny when it happens, it's rare.

5. Never say, "Why did she give him away?" Do I really need to explain why this one would hurt a child? The proper term is "placed." A birth mother and birth father *place* their child for adoption. And again, it's personal and none of your business, so don't ask if you aren't my BFF.

6. Don't say, "It's like he's your real son." This is similar to number three, but worthy of mentioning. He *is* my real son.

7. Don't say, "Do you love him as if he was your own?" Ummm… probably more than you love your little terror, that's for sure. And again… he *is* my own.

8. Never say things like, "You're so wonderful to adopt a child." I am a parent. Just like anybody else with kids.

9. Don't start spewing your horrible adoption stories. "This one time, my friend's sister's aunt's dog's previous owner's niece adopted a baby and the real dad came back and they

took the baby away after they had him for two years." First of all, it probably isn't true. Second of all, how would you feel if I told you about all the ways you could lose your child? Adoption is permanent. And in the extremely rare circumstances that something like that happens, it's not something you should spread because the hurt that exists for all the parties involved must be immeasurable.

10. Don't say things like, "Is it hard for him to be adopted?" Well, it wasn't, until you asked me that right in front of him, you thoughtless soul.

11. I don't want to hear about your second cousin who was on a waiting list for twelve years and never got a baby. Granted, this one was much more annoying when we were going through the adoption process. Nobody wants to know that some people never get chosen. Show some kindness. Even to ugly people.

Some of our dearest friends have grown their families through adoption, and they have their own contributions to make, such as, "How can you ever love your adopted child as much as your biological children?" (Because the heart just grows bigger that way. Because the same God who adopted us into His family loves us just as much as the natural kids. Because love grows from the heart, not from the uterus.)

I am grateful for the input from people who have been on the receiving end of thoughtless comments and questions to help the rest of us be more loving in the way we interact with others.

Do you have anything to add to this list?

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_not_to_say_adoption
on Sept. 28, 2010.

Confessions of a Cellphone-Challenged Journalist

I have a confession.

Not one of those tawdry confessions, but it is a little embarrassing. You see, I am cellphone challenged.

I used a cellphone once – about ten years ago when volunteering to help rebuild Miami after Hurricane Andrew. The BellSouth loaner, a real clunker, helped me navigate the storm-ravaged county amidst downed street signs and landmarks.

But I've never owned one. Voicemail takes my messages and I've seldom wanted to be more accessible. Some of my friends swear by cellphones. Others swear at them. Ever been in a movie theater when a filmgoer gets a call and decides to talk?

My wife attended a conference presentation during which a woman asked the speaker a question from the audience. In the middle of her question, with all eyes on her, her cellphone rang. She not only answered it, but also conducted a brief conversation while everyone watched aghast.

Airline travelers talk before takeoff until the flight attendant tells them to stop. They resume talking when the plane lands. They talk walking through the airport, on the inter-terminal shuttle, entering the restroom. They talk while using the toilet or washing their hands. Some restrooms sound like offices.

Drivers talk. Beachgoers talk. Students talk between classes. Shoppers talk while cruising the aisles. ("What kind of cheese did you want me to get?")

Some restaurants ask diners not to use cellphones. Some summer camps have banned them because they distract kids from social and recreational activities.

My doctor's office has a sign asking patients to please not talk on cellphones while the doctor or nurse is examining them. (Let your mind wander on that theme for a moment.)

One of my favorite signs is inside a nearby church: "Please turn off cellphones during service. (Let God call you.)"

The hit movie, "Bruce Almighty," depicts God's attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the number is valid in many area codes. After the film's release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after 20 calls per hour clogged her cellphone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they'd really discovered a direct line to God. One left a message confessing her adultery.

Another number holder decided to offer some friendly advice. She changed her voice message to say, "Looking for God? Well, I'm not Him, but I do know Him. And knowing Him has changed my life. You can know Him too. In fact, it's a local call."

Come to think of it, that may not be a bad idea. Jeremiah (the Jewish prophet, not the bullfrog) said God told him, "Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know." It doesn't even require a cellphone.

I guess I can live with cellphones if people can realize that they're not for everyone. If you have one, I certainly don't fault you. But please, do turn it off when you go to see the doctor.

The Changing American Family

Kerby Anderson looks at the latest data on the American family and highlights trends that are changing the nature of family in America as well as debunking some sensationalist headlines. From a biblical worldivew perspective, Christians should be concerned about these trends which reflect an ongoing breakdown of family in America.

Introduction

Are we headed toward a post-marital society where marriage is rare and the traditional family is all but extinct? One would certainly think so by reading some of the stories that have appeared lately. A *New York Times* headline in 2003 warned of "marriage's stormy future" and documented the rise in the number of nontraditional unions as well as the rising percentage of people living alone.{1} A 2006 *New York Times* article documented the declining percentage of married couples as a proportion of American households and thus declared that married households are now a minority.{2} And a 2007 headline proclaimed that "51% of women are now living without a spouse."{3}

Well, let's take a deep breath for a moment. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, rumors about the death of marriage and family are greatly exaggerated. But that doesn't mean that marriage as an institution is doing well and will continue to do well in the twenty-first century.

Let's first take on a few of these headlines pronouncing the end of marriage. The October 2006 *New York Times* headline proclaimed that "To Be Married Means to Be Outnumbered." In other words, married households are now a minority in America

and unmarried households are the majority. But the author had to manipulate the numbers in order to come to that conclusion. This so-called "new majority" of unmarried households includes lots of widows who were married. And this claim only works if you count households and not individuals. For example, if you have two households—one with two married people and three children and another with a single widow living alone—they would be split between one married household and one unmarried household. But one household has five people, and the other household has one person.

What about the January 2007 *New York Times* headline proclaiming that "51% of Women Are Now Living Without a Spouse"? Columnist and radio talk show host Michael Medved called this journalistic malpractice({4} and the ombudsman for the *New York Times* took his own paper to task for the article.{5} The most recent available figures showed that a clear majority (56%) of all women over the age of twenty are currently married.

So how did the author come to the opposite conclusion? It turns out that the author chose to count more than ten million girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen as "women." So these so-called "women" are counted as women living without a spouse (never mind that they are really teenage girls living at home with their parents). This caused the ombudsman for the *New York Times* to ask this question in his op-ed: "Can a 15-year-old be a 'Woman Without a Spouse'?"{6}

It is also worth mentioning, that even with this statistical sleight of hand, you still cannot get to the conclusion that a majority of women are living without a spouse. The article's author had to find a way to shave off an additional 2% of the married majority. He did this by including those women whose "husbands are working out of town, are in the military, or are institutionalized."{7}

Conflicting Attitudes about Marriage and Family

It is certainly premature to say that married couples are a minority and women living without a husband are a majority. But there has been a definite trend that we should not miss and will now address. The definition of marriage and the structure of family in the twenty-first century is very different from what existed in the recent past.

A few decades ago, marriages were the foundation of what many commentators referred to as "the traditional family." Now marriages and families are taking some very unfamiliar shapes and orientations due to different views of marriage and family.

Americans are not exactly sure what to think about these dramatic changes in marriage and family. On the one hand, they believe that marriage and family are very important. A *Better Homes and Garden* survey found that their readers rated their relationship to their spouse as the single most important factor in their personal happiness.{8} And a MassMutual study on family values (taken many years ago) reported that eight out of ten Americans reported that their families were the greatest source of pleasure in their lives—more than friends, religion, recreation, or work.{9}

On the other hand, Americans are much less sanguine about other people's marriages and families. I call this the "Lake Wobegon effect" where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are about average." In other words, *their* marriage and family are fine, but the rest of the marriages and families are *not*. While the MassMutual Family Values Study found that a majority (81%) pointed to their family as the greatest source of pleasure, it also found that a majority (56%) rated the family in the U.S. "only fair" or "poor." And almost six in ten expected it to get *worse* in

the next ten years. The survey concluded that “Americans seem to see the family in decline everywhere but in their own home.”{10}

Similar results can be found in many other nationwide polls. A Gallup poll found that Americans believe the family is worse off today than it was ten years ago. And they believed it would be worse off in the future as well.{11} Americans also demonstrated their ambivalence toward marriage and family not only in their attitudes but their actions. One trend watcher predicted more than a decade ago in an article in *American Demographics* that marriage would become in the 1990s and the twenty-first century “an optional lifestyle.”{12}

Changing Trends in Marriage

While it may be too early to put the institution of marriage on the endangered species list, there is good reason to believe that changing attitudes and actions have significantly transformed marriage in the twenty-first century. The current generations are marrying later, marrying less, and divorcing more than previous generations.

A major transition in attitudes toward marriage began with the baby boom generation. From 1946 to 1964, over seventy-six million babies were born. By the 1960s the leading edge of the baby boom generation was coming of age and entering into the years when previous generations would begin to marry. But baby boomers (as well as later generations) did not marry as early as previous generations. Instead, they postponed marriage until they established their careers. From the 1960s to the end of the twenty-first century, the median age of first marriage increased by nearly four years for men and four years for women.

Some of those who postponed marriage ended up postponing marriage indefinitely. An increasing proportion of the

population adopted this “marriage is optional” perspective and never married. They may have had a number of live-in relationships, but they never joined the ranks of those who married. For them, singleness was not a transition but a lifestyle.

Over the last few decades, the U.S. Census Bureau has documented the increasing percentage of people who fit into the category of “adults living alone.” These are often lumped into a larger category of “non-family households.” Within this larger category are singles that are living alone as well as a growing number of unmarried, cohabiting couples who are “living together.” The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 2000 there were nearly ten million Americans living with an unmarried opposite-sex partner and another 1.2 million Americans living with a same-sex partner.

These numbers are unprecedented. It is estimated that during most of the 1960s and 1970s, only about a half a million Americans were living together. And by 1980, that number was just 1.5 million.{13} Now that number is more than twelve million.

Cohabiting couples are also changing the nature of marriage. Researchers estimate that half of Americans will cohabit at one time or another prior to marriage.{14}And this arrangement often includes children. The traditional stereotype of two young, childless people living together is not completely accurate; currently, some 40% of cohabiting relationships involve children.{15}

Couples often use cohabitation to delay or forego marriage. But not only are they postponing future marriage, they are increasing their chance of marriage failure. Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, in their study for the National Marriage Project, wrote: “Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women.” They conclude that those who live

together before they get married are putting their future marriage in danger.{16}

Finally, we should note the impact of cohabitation on divorce. When the divorce rate began to level off and even slightly decline in the 1980s, those concerned about the state of marriage in America began to cheer. But soon the cheers turned to groans when it became obvious that the leveling of the divorce rate was due primarily to an increase in cohabitation. Essentially the divorce rate was down because the marriage rate was down. Couples who break up before they marry don't show up as divorce statistics.

Many marriages today are less permanent than in previous decades. There have always been divorces in this country, but what used to be rare has now become routine. Changing attitudes toward marriage and divorce in this country are reflected in the changing divorce rate.

A graph of the divorce rate shows two significant trends. One is a sharp increase in divorces in the late 1960s that continued through the 1970s. The second is a leveling and even a slight decline in the 1980s. Both are related to the attitudes of the baby boom generation toward marriage and divorce.

The increasing divorce rate in the 1970s was due to both attitude and opportunity. Baby boomers did not stay married as long as their parents due to their different attitudes towards marriage and especially their attitude toward commitment in marriage. It is clear from the social research that the increase in the divorce rate in the 1970s did not come from empty nesters (e.g., builders) finally filing for divorce after sending their children into the world. Instead it came from young couples (e.g., baby boomers) divorcing even before they had children. {17}

The opportunity for divorce was also significant. When

increasing numbers of couples began seeking divorce, state legislatures responded by passing no-fault divorce laws. Essentially a married person could get a divorce for any reason or no reason at all.

Economic opportunity was also a significant factor in divorce. During this same period, women enjoyed greater economic opportunities in the job market. Women with paychecks are less likely to stay in a marriage that was not fulfilling to them and have less incentive to stay in a marriage. Sociologist David Popenoe surveying a number of studies on divorce concluded that "nearly all have reached the same general conclusion. It has typically been found that the probability of divorce goes up the higher the wife's income and the closer that income is to her husband's."{18}

The second part of a graph on divorce shows a leveling and even a slight decline. The divorce rate peaked in 1981 and has been in decline ever since. The reasons are twofold. Initially, the decline had to do with the aging of the baby boom generation who were entering into those years that have traditionally had lower rates of divorce. But long term the reason is due to what we have already discussed in terms of the impact of cohabitation on divorce. Fewer couples are untying the knot because *fewer couples are tying the knot*.

Changing Trends in Family

We have already mentioned that starting with the baby boom generation and continuing on with subsequent generations, couples postponed marriage. But not only did these generations postpone marriage, they also postponed procreation. Unlike the generations that preceded them (e.g., the builder generation born before the end of World War II), these subsequent generations waited longer to have children and also had few children. Lifestyle choice was certainly one factor. Another important factor was cost. The estimated cost of raising a

child during this period of time rose to over six figures. Parents of a baby born in 1979 could expect to pay $66,000 to rear a child to eighteen. For a baby born in 1988, parents could expect to pay $150,000, and that did not include additional costs of piano lessons, summer camp, or a college education.{19}

When these generations did have children, often the family structure was very different than in previous generations. Consider the impact of divorce. Children in homes where a divorce has occurred are cut off from one of the parents and they suffer emotionally, educationally, and economically.

Judith Wallerstein in her research discovered long-term psychological devastation to the children.{20} For example, three out of five children felt rejected by at least one parent. And five years after their parents' divorce, more than one-third of the children were doing markedly worse than they had been before the divorce. Essentially she found that these emotional tremors register on the psychological Richter scale many years after the divorce.

The middle class in this country has been rocked by the one-two punch of divorce and illegitimacy, creating what has been called the "feminization of poverty." U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that single moms are five times more likely to be poor than are their married sisters.{21}

An increasing percentage of women give birth to children out of wedlock. This increase is due in large part to changing attitudes toward marriage and family. In a society that is already changing traditional patterns (by postponing marriage, divorcing more frequently, etc.), it is not surprising that many women are avoiding marriage altogether. Essentially, the current generation disconnects having children and getting married. In their minds, they separate parenthood from marriage, thus creating an enormous increase in the number of single parent homes.

Greater social acceptance of out-of-wedlock births, divorce, and single parenting tends to reinforce the trends and suggests that these percentages will increase in the future. Young adults who contemplate marriage may be less inclined to do so because they were raised in a home where divorce occurred. A young woman raised by a single mom may be less inclined to marry when they are older, convinced that they can raise a child without the help of a husband. Better employment options for young women even encourage them to "go it alone."

These changes in attitudes and changes in the structure of marriage and family have created a very different family in the twenty-first century. One writer imagined the confusion that children would feel in this futuristic scenario:

> *On a spring afternoon, half a century from today, the Joneses are gathered to sing "Happy Birthday" to Junior. There's Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior's two half brothers from his father's first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother's spouse's previous unions, 100-year-old Great Grandpa, all eight of Junior's current "grandparents," assorted aunts, uncles-in-law and stepcousins. While one robot scoops up the gift wrappings and another blows out the candles, Junior makes a wish . . . that he didn't have so many relatives.{22}*

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In Celebration of Fathers

Turn on most American TV shows today and try to find a dad who is respected, honored, and followed as he does his best to lead his family.

Good luck with that.

One of the greatest sources of pain and dysfunction in our culture is what has happened to fatherhood. On the one hand, fathers are dismissed as superfluous by social and cultural policies such as no-fault divorce and the wholesale acceptance of single mothering. On the other, many men passively refuse to resist the gigantic lie that they don’t matter and are not important, producing the disaster of wholesale fatherlessness. The rates of the four major youth pathologies—teen pregnancy, teen drug abuse, school dropouts and juvenile crime—are tightly correlated with fatherlessness, often more so than with any other socioeconomic factor.{1}

God has a very different perspective on fathers and fatherhood. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself to us not just as Creator or Sovereign of the Universe. He has revealed Himself to us as *Father*. Even beyond that is a staggering revelation: the Lord Jesus called Him “Abba”—Daddy{2}, and we are invited to do the same.{3}

Because of this, earthly fathers have an incredibly important responsibility and privilege: to show their children what the

Heavenly Father is like. Every father, whether he wants to or not, whether he's aware of it or not, makes a powerful statement about God with his life that is either true or false. By their modeling, some fathers show God to be warm, accepting, loving, kind, and protective. Others declare that God is distant, cold, disconnected, and punishing. Many believers grow up without a father or with one who is difficult and detached; for them, spiritual and emotional health means learning to recognize and renounce the false image of God they were given and embrace the true Father-heart of God.

Children infer their own value from the way their fathers relate to them. Being ignored or neglected assures a child that she is invisible and worthless. Being treated as a vicarious means to achieve a man's own goals, or worse, as a sexual object, diminishes a child into a thing. But when a dad spends time simply being with his kids, they feel like they matter. When a dad invests in the ordinary moments of life by being fully *present* with his son, a boy learns how to be a male and that he belongs in the world of men. When a dad treats his daughter with respect and dignity, cherishing her femininity regardless of the form it takes—girly-girl or jockette tomboy—she learns that it's safe and good to be a girl. (And she learns what kind of treatment to expect from young men as she grows older.)

Sometimes, the simplest things can make all the difference in the world. On one life-changing Oprah show, someone offered a true word of wisdom, suggesting that a child knows his father really loves him when he sees his daddy's eyes light up. Fathers who heard this and starting putting it into practice reported that it immediately changed their family dynamics as their children felt more loved. Regardless of a child's individual "love language,"{4} there is something profound about being able to see evidence of a father's delight. This is a lovely reflection of the much grander truth that we all

long to see the lit-up face of God's attention, affirmation and affection when He looks at us. Consider the deeply moving Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:

> The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:
> The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:
> The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

I respectfully suggest this is a picture of Abba-Daddy's eyes lit up as He looks at His beloved child, giving us "face time" because He loves us and He wants us to know and *feel* we are loved.

Dad's, this Sunday is your day. Enjoy it, knowing that God has given you the great gift of your irreplaceable influence in the family and in the world. That memorable line from the first "Spiderman" movie is memorable because it's biblical: "With great power comes great responsibility."

The Lord bless you as you use the power of your masculine strength to love and serve your families to the glory of God.

Notes

1. Jeffery M. Leving and Glenn Sacks, American Chronicle: Are single mothers the 'New American Family'?, http://ancpr.com/blog/archives/453#more-453. Accessed June 14, 2007.
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Leftist Jewish Journalist Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly, and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people." "He's just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that's ruining America."

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

Mark Pinsky's new book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this

“nice Jewish boy from Jersey” ended up attending church “more often than many Christians” and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, “I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories.”

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, “”poor, uneducated and easy to command.” They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I’ve known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I’m biased. But I’ve also observed a curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled “The Readable Radical” and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and “Easter Egg Scramble” golf

tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that “if you are sorry, they have to forgive you.” He knows their boss said, “When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against{1}.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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The Myth of Happily Ever After vs. A Biblical

Worldview Perspective on Marriage

Sue Bohlin examines unrealistic expectations that can torpedo a marriage that should be based on biblical worldview principles. As she examines these expectations from a Christian perspective, one begins to understand how they run counter to the marriage principles contained in the Bible.

Happily Ever After

The wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana was one of the most-watched romantic real-life events of the twentieth century. Between the legitimate longings of our hearts, and the way the Disney empire has fed our romantic fantasies for fairy tales, we are captivated by storybook romance.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, who presided at the royal wedding, gave a marvelous sermon that day. In it he said, "Here is the stuff of which fairy tales are made, the prince and princess on their wedding day. But fairy tales usually end at this point with the simple phrase, 'They lived happily ever after.' This may be because fairy tales regard marriage as an anticlimax after the romance of courtship. This is not the Christian view. Our faith sees the wedding day not as a place of arrival but the place where the adventure begins."{1}

The divorce rate in our culture is at an all-time high. Whatever happened to "happily ever after"? Why is it so hard to maintain the hopes and dreams that surround a beautiful wedding with all its promises of love and fidelity, sacrifice and service?

Marriage counselors Les and Leslie Parrott have an idea.

In their excellent book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts,* they suggest four myths that have torpedoed many marriages

because of unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about what marriage should be. In what follows, we'll look at four marriage myths that are the most harmful and most common:

- We expect exactly the same things from marriage.
- Everything good in our marriage will get better.
- Everything bad in my life will disappear.
- My spouse will make me whole.

"For too long," the Parrotts write, "marriage has been saddled with unrealistic expectation and misguided assumptions. Liberated from these four myths, couples can settle into the real world of marriage—with all its joys and sorrows, passion and pain."{2}

Many people know that something is wrong but they don't know what; and you can't fix or change something if you don't know what's wrong in the first place. Many of our marriage problems are due to harmful expectations and beliefs that fly in the face of "real reality." One divorce lawyer told the Parrotts that the number-one reason people split up is that they "refuse to accept the fact that they are married to a *human being*."{3} In this article we bust the myth of "happily ever after."

Myth #1: "We Expect Exactly the Same Things From Marriage"

When people are in love, it's easy to assume that the other person has the same values and expectations as we do. But every family has its own culture, so to speak, and we tend to expect life will continue the same way once we're adults as it was while we were growing up. One way these differing expectations play out is in the unspoken rules of each family.

We are usually not aware of our unspoken rules and expectations until the other person violates them. I recently heard a great word of wisdom: "Expectations are the mother of

resentments.” How true is that?! When our spouse doesn’t live up to our unspoken expectations, we can feel frustrated and irritated, and often we don’t even know why we’re upset because we don’t know what’s wrong. It’s helpful to think through “the rules” of one’s family so that unspoken rules and expectations are brought out into the light of examination. Here are some rules from various families:

- Don’t ask for help unless you’re desperate.
- Downplay your successes.
- Be invisible.
- Get someone else to do the hard or dirty work.
- Don’t get sick.
- Never get angry.
- Don’t talk about your body.
- Don’t go to bed without cleaning the kitchen.
- Don’t talk about your feelings.
- Never order dessert at a restaurant.
- Don’t ever upset Daddy.

Can you see how these unspoken rules can cause havoc if a spouse doesn’t know about them?

Another source of mismatched expectations is the unconscious roles that spouses fall into, the way an actor follows a script. We inherit expectations about how wives and husbands act by watching our parents and other adults, and we often play out those roles the same way unless we choose to change it. For example, one new husband surprised his wife at dinner by picking up his empty iced tea glass and tinkling the ice cubes. His father had always signaled this way to his mother that he was ready for more tea. The bride was not pleased to learn that her husband expected to play the role of pampered king whose every whim was gladly granted!

The myth that “we expect exactly the same things from marriage” is busted by identifying and talking about unspoken expectations and unconscious roles. The more openly couples

discuss their differing expectations, the more likely they are to create a vision of marriage that they can agree on.

Myth #2: "Everything Good in Our Relationship Will Get Better"

Most people, when they fall in love, really believe their love will last forever because it's so intense and intoxicating. It's hard not to believe that everything good about the relationship will just continue to get better and better as time goes on. But reality "is that not *everything* gets better. Many things improve in relationships, but some things become more difficult. Every successful marriage requires necessary losses, and in choosing to marry, you inevitably go through a mourning process."{4}

For some, marriage means giving up childhood. It means giving up the safety and security of being your parents' child, and becoming a full-fledged adult. God makes this statement in Genesis 2:24 when He says, " For this reason a man *will leave his father and mother* and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Marriage means the end of childhood, and that can feel like a loss to be mourned.

Marriage also "means giving up a carefree lifestyle and coming to terms with new limits. It means unexpected inconveniences."{5} Marriage means always passing one's plans and choices through the filter of "us." Since "the two become one," many of our even mundane life choices impact someone else. That can feel like a loss to be faced, as well.

The Parrotts write, "By far the most dramatic loss experienced in a new marriage is the idealized image you have of your partner. This was the toughest myth we encountered in our marriage. Each of us had an airbrushed mental picture of who the other was. But eventually, married life asked us to look reality square in the face and reckon with the fact that we did not marry the person we thought we did."{6}

It is an illusion that the intense romantic thrill of the beginning of a relationship will last forever. “Debunking the myth of eternal romance will do more than just about anything to help . . . build a lifelong happy marriage.”{7} When we get past the myth of continual bliss with a perfect partner, we can embrace the reality that we married another flawed and fallen human being. This is good news, because God only gives grace for reality, nor for illusion or temporary enchantment. And this is good news because intimacy is only available with a real person, not with an idealized image.

Myth #3: “Everything Bad in My Life Will Disappear”

Remember the story of Cinderella? A poor, mistreated stepchild who is forced to serve her wicked stepfamily is magically turned into a beautiful princess. She is rescued by her Prince Charming and they live . . . all together now . . . “happily ever after.” And don’t we all long for a Prince Charming or a beautiful princess to make us happy and wipe away every tear from our eyes?

The myth of a “happily ever after” life is a legitimate longing of our hearts. We ache to return to Eden where everything bad in our lives *will* disappear. God promises that He will eventually make all things right again, but it doesn’t happen in marriage between two fallen human beings living in a fallen world.

Marriage is a glorious institution invented by God, but it “does not erase personal pain or eliminate loneliness. Why? Because people get married primarily to further their own well-being, not to take care of their partners’ needs. The bad traits and feelings you carried around before you were married remain with you as you leave the wedding chapel. A marriage certificate is not a magical glass slipper.”{8}

The Parrotts write, “Getting married cannot instantly cure all

our ills, but marriage *can* become a powerful healing agent over time. If you are patient, marriage can help you overcome even some of the toughest of tribulations."{9} Perhaps the biggest reason for this is the amazing *power* of love. I believe God's love is the strongest healing agent in the universe. In marriage, He can love us through our spouses; He can be "Jesus with skin on" to each of us.

A healthy marriage can become a place to wrap up unfinished business from childhood and deal with unresolved hurts. God showed me this truth personally. I had experienced a great deal of rejection in relationships before I met my husband. He told me that we were married ten years before he could say the words, "I need to talk to you about something" and I wouldn't automatically wince and pull back in fear. Over time, Ray's faithful love and acceptance of me healed the rejection wounds.

It's a myth that everything bad in our lives will disappear when we say "I do," but God's grace is bigger than the myth. We still live in a fallen world with a fallen spouse, but God can bring much grace through mutual love.

Myth #4: "My Spouse Will Make Me Whole"

One of the greatest lines in all of movie history belongs to Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire* where he tells his wife, "You complete me." It is romantic and feels emotionally satisfying—but in reality, it's just not true.

Couples who swallow the myth that their spouse will make them whole are in danger of going to one of two extremes. One is an unhealthy dependence on the other that the Parrotts term an *enmeshed* relationship. They unconsciously make their partner completely responsible for their well-being. They are like ticks that constantly attempt to suck life and love and meaning from their spouse. It is a form of idolatry, because they are looking to their partner to provide emotional "living

water” that only God can give.

The other extreme is a *disengaged* relationship of what the Parrotts call “rugged self-reliance.” These spouses are so isolated and independent from each other that they function more like neighbors or business associates than a God-created union of two souls. The first kind of couple is looking for wholeness from their partner; the second kind of couple is looking for wholeness from within. It is also a form of idolatry, because they are looking to themselves instead of God to provide meaning for life.

Neither enmeshed nor disengaged relationships are healthy, and neither will allow the people in them to experience wholeness. A sense of wholeness is found in an *interdependent* relationship where two people with self-respect and dignity make a commitment to nurture their own spiritual and emotional growth as well as their partner’s.

Enmeshed relationships are like the capital letter A. They lean on each other so much that if one moves, the whole structure falls down. Their security is in another person instead of in God. Disengaged relationships are like the letter H. Partners stand virtually alone. If one lets go, the other hardly feels a thing. Interdependent relationships are like the letter M. They could stand on their own, but they choose to stay connected to the other out of their fullness, not out of their emptiness. If one lets go, the other feels a loss but can recover.

Every marriage is between two broken and fallen people who cannot make each other whole. We are called to love and respect each other, serve and celebrate each other—but only God can make us whole.

“Happily ever after” may be for fairy tales, but that doesn’t mean there is no such thing as a happy, rich, fulfilling marriage. But it’s only possible for those who live in

reality, not in the fantasy of make-believe myths. May God give us grace to trust Him to walk in truth and not illusion.

Notes

1. Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 26.
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3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid., 21.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 24.
9. Ibid., 25.

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