

Marriage Reminders

Numerous books, essays, magazine articles, radio and television commentaries, and sermons have been dedicated to the subject of Christian marriage. In light of the tragic divorce rate and the continuing struggles that are experienced by many couples, this is not surprising. Marriage is a subject that has immediate application to a large portion of the population. The comments that are offered in this essay are not necessarily intended to provide new perspectives. They are intended to serve as reminders to all of us, no matter what our marital state may be. After all, few of us can stay “on track” at all times. We sometimes need a gentle or not-so-gentle nudge to return to what God intends for His creation: marriage.

Foundational Truths About Marriage

The first reminder focuses on what we will call “foundational truths.” These truths are found in two passages in the first two chapters of Genesis.

The first passage is Genesis 1:26-28. It states that both the man and woman were created in God’s image. Among many results of such a statement, this affirms the dignity of both sexes among all mankind. Human beings are the zenith of creation; men and women are blessed uniquely by God.

The second passage is Genesis 2:18-25 which asserts several truths that are applicable to the marriage union. First, the woman was fashioned from the fiber of the man, and she was created as an equal but opposite helper for him. Upon observing the newly created woman, the man reacted in a way that indicates he recognized her very special significance. We can only imagine his joy and excitement when he first caught a glimpse of her. Second, God affirms the marital union by commanding that couples are to leave their parents. The priorities are changed; a new family is to be formed. Third, the couple is to cleave together and become one flesh, an affirmation of the sexual union in marriage.

But it is to be much more than simply a sexual union; it is to be a holistic union, a union of the total person, both material and immaterial, a “oneness.”

These two passages from Genesis should spur us to better appreciate how highly God values marriage and how we should as well. The fact that we are made in God’s image means we should “reverence” and “respect” each other. If it is true that my spouse is made in God’s image, that should prompt me to treat her with great respect and honor. She is not an accidental being; she is specially related to the Creator of the universe. When I treat her with reverence I am paying homage to God.

Second, God’s foundational instructions should lead us to live with our spouses with a sense of commitment that transcends any other earthly relationship. If we are to leave our parents, if we are to cleave to our spouses, and if we are to be one flesh, then we must remember that such concepts are unique. Thus I am giving myself to the most important person in my life. I don’t think of returning to my parents physically or emotionally; I don’t cleave to anyone else the way I cleave to my wife; I am not one flesh with anyone other than her. And the beauty of all this is that God has related these commands for our good. They constitute the first steps to marital fulfillment.

Biblical Symbiosis

Our second marriage reminder centers on what we call “biblical symbiosis.” An illustration of

symbiosis from the animal kingdom may be helpful here. There is, for example, a particular species of fish that spends its life in close proximity to the mouth of a shark. In fact, it eats from the shark's teeth. (This keeps the shark from making too many visits to the dentist.) This is an illustration of symbiosis, or "two different organisms living in close association or union, especially where such an arrangement is advantageous to both." On the other hand, most of us have had to deal with the irritating results of a mosquito's attack. The mosquito is an example of parasitism, "a relationship in which one organism lives off another and derives sustenance and protection from it without making compensation."

Which of these two illustrations should serve as an example of Christian marriage? Surely most of us would reply that symbiosis, not parasitism, should be the correct model. Unfortunately, this model is not always lived out among spouses. The results of a parasitic relationship are devastating, to which many can testify.

The Bible, of course, provides insights that remind us of how the proper model for marriage should be constructed. First, Galatians 3:28 asserts that there is "neither male nor female" and all are "one in Christ Jesus." And 1 Peter 3:7 states that the husband should treat his wife as "a fellow-heir of the grace of life." Thus Christian couples should remember that they are spiritual equals with sexual differences.

Second, we should follow Christ's model. The Lord put Himself in subjection to His earthly parents (Luke 2:51-52) as well as the heavenly Father. He adapted Himself to earthly orders. Even though He was total deity, He humbled Himself for our benefit (Phil. 2:1-11). In addition, 1 Corinthians 11:3 indicates that Christ modeled the concept of "necessary headship" in that "God is the head of Christ."

Third, we need to be reminded that all things are subjected to Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). This includes His body, the church, of which the Christian couple is a part. Thus a proper view of authority and subjection begins with our allegiance to Christ, the head of the church.

Several thoughts come to mind in regard to these Biblical perspectives, and all of them revolve around the attitude and character of Christ Himself.

Wouldn't it be odd to think that Christ views us based upon whether we are male or female? He didn't die for males before females, or vice-versa. In our relationship to Him there is no sexual distinction. The Christian couple should take this to heart; there is not to be a "lording over" each other; there is to be no spiritual pride.

It is clear that both spouses are to remember that subjection is the responsibility of all Christians. The Lord has demonstrated this most perfectly. The couple begins with this foundation; then they discover how to combine subjection with a proper view of authority within the family, a concept we will discuss in the next portion of this essay.

Let's return to our definition of symbiosis: "Two different organisms living in close association or union, especially where such an arrangement is advantageous to both." Christian marriage should be composed of two different people in a loving union that is based upon subjection first to Christ and then one another. And surely such an arrangement will prove to be advantageous to both.

Responsibilities

What's a wife to do? What's a husband to do? Does the Bible provide specific guidelines for each? The answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Our continuing review of "Marriage Reminders" brings us to the

third reminder, which we will simply call “responsibilities.”

The wife’s responsibility is most succinctly stated in Ephesians 5:22-24. The term “subjection” is the summary word for her. She is to submit to her husband. Before we continue, though, it is important to note that the verb for subjection is found in verse 21; then it is implied in verse 22. And verse 21 states that all Christians are to “be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” As we stressed earlier, subjection applies to all of us. But verse 22 does stress that the wife is to have a particular attitude toward her husband.

There is another very important element of this verse that is not stressed often enough. We cannot honestly approach this verse without emphasizing the latter part of it: “as to the Lord.” The wife’s subjection is first of all to the Lord, then to her husband, because this is the Lord’s pragmatic plan for marriage. She is to respect the headship of her husband because this is God’s idea, not her husband’s. This is not demeaning. It is Godly. Her self-esteem is not based upon her husband; it is based upon her place in the sight of God. There is an important analogy here. She is to recognize that her husband is said to be her head “as Christ also is the head of the church” (verse 23). The wife should recognize this analogy and realize that her husband has been compared to the compassionate and perfect Christ. He has a grave responsibility, and she needs to encourage him by following God’s design for her.

Compared to the wife’s responsibility, the husband has a sobering and challenging one. His role is also outlined in Ephesians, verses 5:25-33. The most important aspect of this role can be found in the Greek term “agape” (love), which is used to describe how a husband is to respond to his wife. It is important to note that the word is used in the imperative mood. Thus it is a strong command which involves action, not just “feeling.” This love is demonstrated, just as God demonstrated His love by giving His son (John 3:16). Also, a humbling analogy is given. The husband is to “agape” his wife as Christ “loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” This entails action and sacrifice. The husband is to show his wife that he loves her because she is worth sacrificing himself on her behalf. What an awesome responsibility—a responsibility that should be humbling for those husbands who would use their authority as head of the home to treat their wives in a tyrannical manner. This does not imply that the husband’s authority is weakened. The husband is still in a position of headship, but that headship should be used to treat his wife as a “fellow-heir of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). As with the wife’s role, the husband’s role demonstrates God’s pragmatic plan for marital life.

So the responsibilities are clear: the wife is to submit “as to the Lord;” the husband is to love as Christ loved.

Communication

Most married couples are in need of another very important reminder. That is, their relationship requires communication. The joy of marriage stems from a commitment that is communicated. This vital principle can be related in many ways. We will share three of them.

First, the couple must learn to talk with one another. Perhaps that sounds simple, but don’t let its simplicity fool you. Actually too many couples have experienced and are experiencing a deteriorating relationship because they have lost their ability to relate verbally. In my many years of experience in the ministry it has become obvious that one of the major flaws in Christian marriages is a lack of conversation involving anything beyond the absolute necessities. Too many couples don’t really know each other. They are often total strangers.

Each spouse has a need to express the deepest longings of the heart and soul with his or her lifetime companion. Sometimes this requires a great deal of effort and courage, especially for a partner who

is not accustomed to being vulnerable. But the effort required offers wonderful results. Sharing words that contain a spouse's thoughts, ideas, complaints, doubts, fears, expectations, plans, dreams, joys, and even frustrations can lead to a deepening bond that in turn leads to a stronger marriage.

This type of communication requires concentration. It should be done without interference. Each spouse should give undivided attention to the other. If one is talking, the other must listen. That's the only way this form of communication can be successful.

Second, couples need to be reminded to communicate better sexually. God has given us the freedom to experience the joy of expressing marital commitment by "becoming one flesh." This rich phrase is certainly meant to refer to sex in marriage, but we cannot forget that the type of sex that we are designed to experience involves more than just a physical act. It also involves the most intimate form of human communication. The Song of Solomon, for example, is full of expressions that indicate the beauty of communication that include, but also transcend the physical. Proverbs 5:15-19 contains many expressions of intimacy, such as forms of the words "rejoice," "satisfaction," and "exhilaration" which emphasize both the physical and non-physical aspects of sexual intimacy. 1

Thessalonians 4:4 states that a spouse is "to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor," words that entail something beyond the physical. It would be difficult, for example, for a man to honor his wife sexually without communicating love, appreciation, patience, compassion, and many other attitudes that are much-needed by his spouse.

Third, most marriages can benefit from communication that is unspoken and nonsexual. Meaningful glances, unexpected flowers, cards sent for no reason other than as an expression of love, a gentle touch; these are the ways of communicating that can sometimes mean the most. They are the types of things that are stored in a couple's memory bank to be withdrawn again and again.

It is helpful to note that nonverbal communication often leads to or reinforces verbal and sexual communication. A certain glance can be very romantic to some; an unexpected flower can remind one of a very special day; a card can spur significant verbal communication.

The couple that learns to communicate verbally, sexually, and nonverbally will experience the joy of marriage.

Little Things Mean a Lot

"Little things mean a lot" is a maxim with a lot of meaning for marriage. Most husbands and wives can benefit from being reminded of this. The following lists include some of those "little things." They are offered with the hope that they will encourage you to consider which of them could be helpful in your marriage. Wives, in particular, are usually deeply touched and encouraged through such things. And husbands can certainly be positively affected when their wives take the time to do the little things that mean so much.

We begin with suggestions for wives.

- Pray for your husband daily.
- Show him you love him unconditionally.
- Tell him you think he's the greatest.
- Show him you believe in him.
- Don't talk negatively to him or about him.
- Tell him daily that you love him.

- Give him adoring looks.
- Show him that you enjoy being with him.
- Listen to him when he talks with you.
- Hug him often.
- Kiss him tenderly and romantically at times.
- Show him that you enjoy the thought of sex.
- Show him you enjoy meeting his sexual needs.
- Take the sexual initiative at times.
- Express interest in his interests.
- Fix his favorite meal at an unexpected time.
- Demonstrate your dedication to him in public.
- Do things for him he doesn't expect.
- Show others you are proud to be his wife.
- Rub his back, legs, and feet.
- Stress his strengths, not his weaknesses.
- Don't try to mold him into someone else.
- Revel in his joys; share his disappointments.
- Show him your favorite times are with him.
- Show him you respect him more than anyone.
- Don't give him reason to doubt your love.
- Leave "I love you" notes in unexpected places.
- Give him your undivided attention often.
- Tell him he is your "greatest claim to fame."
- Let him hear you thank God for him.

Now here are suggestions for husbands.

- Say "I love you" several times a day.
- Tell her she is beautiful often.
- Kiss her several times a day.
- Hug her several times a day.
- Put your arm around her often.
- Hold her hand while walking.
- Come up behind her and hug her.
- Always sit by her when possible.
- Rub her feet occasionally.
- Give her a massage occasionally.
- Always open doors for her.
- Always help her with chairs, etc.
- Ask her opinion when making decisions.
- Show interest in what she does.
- Take her flowers unexpectedly.
- Plan a surprise night out.
- Ask if there are things you can do for her.
- Communicate with her sexually.
- Show affection in public places.
- Serve her breakfast in bed.
- Train yourself to think of her first.
- Show her you are proud to be her husband.
- Train yourself to be romantic.

- Write a love note on the bathroom mirror.
- Call during the day to say “I love you.”
- Always call and tell her if you will be late.
- Let her catch you staring lovingly at her.
- Praise her in front of others.
- Tell her she is your “greatest claim to fame.”
- Let her hear you thank God for her.

Of course these lists are not exhaustive. The number of things that can be done to build up a marriage may be limitless. When our imaginations are active, we can discover exciting and uplifting ways to experience the wonder of marriage.

In summary, we have seen that marriage needs to be built on God’s foundational truths, that marriage should be a relationship that blesses each partner, that specific responsibilities are given to the wife and husband, that communication is one of the important building blocks of a strong marriage, and lastly we have been reminded that “little things mean a lot.”

May God bless us as we strive to put these reminders into practice.

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