35 Years and Counting

Yesterday (August 3, 2009), Ray and I celebrated 35 years of marriage. My good friend and fellow Engage blogger Gwynne Johnsons wrote on my Facebook, “Congratulations . . . got you beat by 15 years :) …Good guys are the BEST of God’s gifts . . .” Amen to that!

We’ve been privileged to walk through almost all those years with our dear friends and fellow Probe Ministries staff Kerby and Susanne Anderson (whom you may recognize from the national radio show Point of View), who were married the same day. Last night, as we visited together, I asked the Andersons and Ray what they had learned over our 35 years, and we were all in agreement about the basics.

The non-negotiable part of a successful marriage is to continually love, accept and forgive the other. That starts with the absolute commitment to mean and to live out our wedding vows. It’s a covenant, a “promise on steroids,” that goes far beyond “I promise to be here as long as love shall last.”

I’ve been thinking about what I’ve learned for sure over 35 years.

As one of our pastors once said, “The AIDS of marriage is justified self-centeredness.” Selfishness is a oneness-killer. God intends to use our spouse to shape us and mold us and give us daily opportunities to crucify our flesh, our self-centeredness, as He forms us into the people He intends us to be.

It’s helpful to see marriage as two “forgiven forgivers.” Extending forgiveness as we have received it from God, as quickly as possible, keeps the oneness and intimacy flowing.

We need to keep a balance between what we overlook and let go

from a heart of grace, and what we need to address because it is big enough to cause us to withdraw from the other. Godly conflict resolution is essential for living well with another sinner.

Cultivating an "attitude of gratitude" and verbally expressing gratitude for the small things the other does to serve and love us, goes a long way.

There is no substitute for creating habits of kindness toward our spouse. And we are just as pleasant and courteous to each others as we are to strangers, which is simply a habit as well as a character issue.

Learning about communication skills truly enhances the marriage relationship. The most powerful tools I've ever come across, and which we have made a part of how we live with each other, are:
1. Don't interrupt the other person.
2. Tell the other what you heard to make sure you understood them right.
3. Avoid being a WENI (sounds like "weenie"): **W**ithdrawing, **E**scalating when arguing, **N**egatively interpreting what the other is saying, and **I**nvalidating the other.

God has been good, and we thank Him for His blessing of a great friendship and relationship with each other!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/35_years_and_counting

Cool Stuff About Love and Sex

Hey, kids. Want to read some cool stuff about love and sex that you might never hear from your folks? Hey, parents. Want

to learn how to communicate with your kids about these important topics? Read on!

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Cool Stuff

Psst! Hey, kids! Want to hear some really cool stuff about love and sex that you might never hear from your parents? Listen up! (But . . . how about closing your ears for the next few seconds?)

Hey, parents! Want to learn how to talk to your kids about sex in a way they will understand and relate to? Keep listening.{1}

OK, kids. You can listen again.

"A fulfilling love life. How can I have one? How can I get the most out of sex?" University students worldwide ask these questions. As I've spoken on their campuses, I've tried to offer some practical principles because I believe both pleasure and emotional fulfillment are important facets of sex. These principles relate to teens, too. Teens of all ages.

Sex is often on our minds. According to two psychologists at the universities of Vermont and South Carolina, 95% of people think about sex at least once each day.{2} You might wonder, "You mean that 5% of the people *don't*?"

Why does sex exist? One of the main purposes of sex is pleasure. Consider what one wise man named Solomon wrote. Writing sometimes in "PG" (but not "R-rated") terms, he said:

Drink water from your own cistern
And fresh water from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone

And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.{3}

Solomon's ancient love sonnet, the "Song of Solomon," is one of the best sex manuals ever written. It traces the beauty of a sexual relationship in marriage and is an openly frank description of marital sexual intimacy. You might want to read it yourself. (Would it surprise you to know that it's in the Bible? You can dog-ear the good parts.)

Another purpose of sex is to develop oneness or unity. Fifteen hundred years before Christ, Moses, the great Israeli liberator, wrote, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."{4} When two people unite sexually, they "become one flesh."

A third purpose for sex is procreation. That, of course, is how we all got here. You learn that in first year biology, right?

OK, so sex is for pleasure, unity, and procreation. But how can people get the most out of love and sex?

How to Have a Most Fulfilling Love Life

One way not to have a fulfilling love life in marriage is to concentrate solely on sexual technique. There is certainly nothing wrong with learning sexual technique—especially the basics—but technique by itself is not the answer.

The qualities that contribute to a successful sex life are the same ones that contribute to a successful interpersonal relationship. Qualities like love, commitment, and communication.

Consider love. As popular speaker and author Josh McDowell points out, those romantic words, “I love you,” can be interpreted several different ways. One meaning is “I love you *if*—If you go out with me . . . if you are lighthearted . . . if you sleep with me.” Another meaning is “I love you *because*—because you are attractive . . . strong . . . intelligent.” Both types of love must be earned.

The best kind of love is unconditional. It says, “I love you, *period*. I love you even if someone better looking comes along, even if you change, even if you have zoo breath in the morning. I place your needs above my own.”

One young engaged couple had popularity, intelligence, good looks, and athletic success that seemed to portend a bright future. Then the young woman suffered a skiing accident that left her paralyzed for life. Her fiancé deserted her.

This true story—portrayed in the popular film, “The Other Side of the Mountain”—was certainly complex. But was his love for her “love, period”? Or was it love “if” or love “because”? Unconditional love (or “less-conditional”, because none of us is perfect) is an essential building block for a lasting relationship.

Unconditional love with caring and acceptance can help a sexual relationship in a marriage. Sex, viewed in this manner, becomes not a self-centered performance but a significant expression of mutual love.

Commitment is also important for a strong relationship and fulfilling sex. Without mutual commitment, neither spouse will be able to have the maximum confidence that the relationship is secure.

Good communication is essential. If a problem arises, couples need to talk it out and forgive rather than stew in their juices. As one sociology professor expressed it, “Sexual foreplay involves the ’round-the-clock relationship.'”{5}

Why Wait?

After I'd spoken in a human sexuality class at Arizona State University, one student said, "You're talking about sex within marriage. What about premarital sex?" He was right. I was saying that sexual intercourse is designed to work best in a happy marriage and recommending waiting until marriage before experiencing sex.

This view is, of course, very controversial. You may agree with me. Or you may think I am from another planet, and I respect your right to feel that way. Here's why I waited.

First is a moral reason. According to the perspective I represent, the biblical God clearly says to wait.{6} Some people think that God wants to make them miserable. Actually, He loves us and wants our best. There are practical reasons for waiting.

Premarital sex can detract from a strong relationship and a fulfilling love life. Too often, it's merely a self-gratifying experience. After an intimate sexual encounter, one partner might be saying, "I love you" while the other is thinking, "I love it."

Very often premarital sex lacks total, permanent commitment. This can create insecurity. For instance, while the couple is unmarried, the nagging thought can persist, "If he or she has slept with me, whom else have they slept with?" After they marry, one might think, "If they were willing to break a standard with me before we married, will they with someone else after we marry?" Doubt can chip away at their relationship.

Premarital sex can also inhibit communication. Each might wonder, "How do I compare with my lover's other partners? Does he or she tell them how I perform in bed?" Each may become less open; communication can deteriorate and so can the

relationship. Premarital sex can lessen people's chances to experience maximum oneness and pleasure. I'm not claiming that premarital sex eliminates your chances for great sex in marriage. But I am saying that it can introduce factors that can be difficult to overcome.

A recently married young woman told me her perspective after a lecture at Sydney University in Australia. She said, "I really like what you said about waiting. My fiancé and I had to make the decision and we decided to wait." (Each had been sexually active in other previous relationships.) She continued: "With all the other tensions, decisions and stress of engagement, sex would have been just another worry. Waiting 'till our marriage before we had sex was the best decision we ever made."

Wise words. I waited because God said to, because there were many practical advantages, and because none of the arguments I heard for not waiting were strong enough.{7}

The Vital Dimension

So far we've looked at "Why sex?", "How to have a most fulfilling love life," and "Why wait?". Consider now the vital dimension in any relationship.

Powerful emotional factors can make it difficult for teens to wait until marriage for sexual intercourse or to stop having sex. A longing to be close to someone or a yearning to express love can generate intense desires for physical intimacy. Many singles today want to wait but lack the inner strength or self esteem. They may fear losing love if they postpone sex.

Often sex brings emptiness rather than the wholeness people seek through it. As one TV producer told me, "Frankly, I think the sexual revolution has backfired in our faces. It's degrading to be treated like a piece of meat." The previous night her lover had justified his decision to sleep around by

telling her, “There’s plenty of me for everyone.” What I suspect he meant was, “There’s plenty of everyone for me.” She felt betrayed and alone.

I explained to her and to her TV audience that sexuality also involves the spiritual. One wise spiritual teacher understood our loneliness and longings for love. He recognized human emotional needs for esteem, acceptance, and wholeness and offered a plan to meet them. His plan has helped people to become brand “new persons” inside.{8} He promised unconditional love to all who ask.{9} Once we know we’re loved and accepted, we can have greater security to be vulnerable in relationships and new inner strength to make wise choices for safe living.{10}

This teacher said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”{11} Millions attest to the safety and security He can provide in relationships. His name, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth. Though I had been a skeptic, I placed my faith in Him personally my freshman year in college. Through a simple heart attitude, I said, “Jesus, I believe you died and rose again for me. I ask you to enter my life, forgive me, and give me the new life you promised.” He forgave all my flaws—and there were (and are) many of those. He said His own death and resurrection—once I accepted His pardon—erased my guilt.{12} That was great news!

Marriage with Jesus involved can be like triangle with God at the apex and the two spouses at the bottom corners. As each partner grows closer to God, they also grow closer to each other. Life doesn’t become perfect, but God’s friendship can bring a vital dimension to any relationship.

Parents and Kids

A nationwide survey of teens asked the question, “When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?” Forty-nine percent of teens responding said it was their

parents. The next closest response was “Friends” (16 percent). Eleven percent said the media influenced their decisions about sex the most. Only 5 percent said it was their romantic partner.{13} Kids, lots of your peers think that it is important to consider how their parents feel about sex.

And teens feel that talking with their parents about sex can make important sexual decisions easier. In a subsequent national survey, teens overwhelmingly expressed that they could more easily postpone sexual activity and avoid getting pregnant if they could only talk about these matters more openly with their folks.{14}

But there’s a problem. Too many parents are unaware how important what they think about sex is to their teens. Parents often think that their teenagers’ friends are the strongest influence on their teen’s decisions about sex. Yet teens don’t consider their friends as being nearly as influential as parents think they are.{15}

And mom, you are really, really important!

A major report based on two University of Minnesota studies involving national data found that teens having close relationships with their mothers are more likely than teens lacking close relationships with their mothers to delay first intercourse. The report authors note, “previous studies have shown that mothers tend to have a greater influence than fathers on teens’ sexual decision-making.”{16}

What can a parent do to help their teens develop positive, healthy sexual attitudes and behavior? Here are some ideas:

- Develop close, loving relationships with your kids from the time they are young.
- Model the types of behavior and attitudes you wish them to emulate.
- Listen to them and treat them with respect.
- Talk about sex, your own values, and why you hold them.

- Help your teen think through their life goals, including education, and how teenage sexual activity might affect their dreams.
- Discuss what types of media are appropriate for your son or daughter to consume.

Making sexual decisions can be hard for teens today. Parents and teens can help each other by becoming close friends and by communicating. It's not always easy, but the rewards can be significant.

Notes

1. Parts of this article are adapted from Rusty Wright, "Dynamic Sex: Unlocking the Secret to Love," Every Student's Choice, 1996 and Rusty Wright, "Safe Sex?", Cross & Crescent LXXXI:4, Winter 1994-95, pp. 19-21.
2. Kathleen Kelleher, "Entertaining Fantasies? Don't Worry, Everyone's Doing It," *Los Angeles Times,* August 15, 1995, E1. She cites Harold Leitenberg of the University of Vermont and Kris Henning, "now at the University of South Carolina Medical School".
3. Proverbs 5:15-19 NASB.
4. Genesis 2:24 NASB.
5. Emily Dale, Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, 1975.
6. 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.
7. For a summary of arguments for premarital sex, with responses, see Wright, "Dynamic Sex: Unlocking the Secret to Love," op. cit.
8. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.
9. John 3:16; 13:34-35; 17:20, 23, 26; 1 John 4:7-21, 5:14-15.
10. Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:16-24; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.
11. John 8:32 NASB.
12. Luke 24:44-47; Colossians 2:12-14.
13. "Faithful Nation: What American Adults and Teens Think

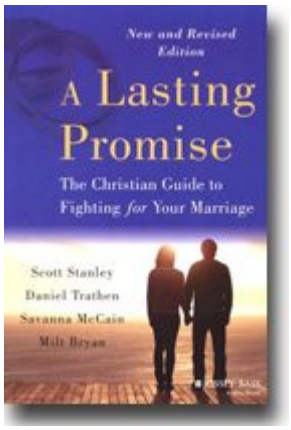
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15. Ibid., pp. 2, 22-23.
16. "Teens' Closeness With Their Mothers Linked to Delay in Initiation of Sexual Activity, Study Says," Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report, September 5, 2002, http://www.kaisernetwork.org/daily_reports/print_report.cfm?DR_ID=13275&dr_cat=2. The words quoted are those of the Kaiser Report summary of what the University of Minnesota research authors communicated.

This article is adapted with permission from Rusty Wright, "Cool Stuff About Love and Sex," *The Plain Truth,* January/February 2004, pp. 17-19.

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Why Marriages Fail

Why do marriages fail? While the answers to that question are many, there is a growing body of empirical research to suggest there are four negative risk factors that create barriers to oneness in marriage and increase a couple's chances for marital failure.



I am going to look at these risk factors and see how they can be corrosive elements to oneness in marriage. Most of the material I will cover comes from PREP, which stands for the "Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program" developed at the University of Denver. The material was originally published in a book entitled *Fighting for Your Marriage,* and has been featured on numerous TV newsmagazine programs like "20/20." There is a Christian version of this material found in a book written by Scott Stanley entitled *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. Perhaps you have heard marriage speakers like Gary Smalley or Dave and Claudia Arp recommend this book (which should be available in your local Christian bookstore and is also available online at Amazon.com).

The significance of this research is two-fold. First, it provides a strong body of university research on what makes marriages fail. Other Christian books, though very helpful, are often based upon the opinions and spiritual insights of the authors. The material we will be talking about in this article is based on clinical studies which validate biblical principles others have discussed.

Second, the research provides an extremely accurate predictor of subsequent behavior and marital failure. In one of the key studies, researchers followed a sample of 135 couples for twelve years, starting before they were married. The researchers found that using only data from before the couple married, they were able to differentiate those couples who do well from those who do not, with up to 91% accuracy. In other words, the seeds of distress and possible divorce were already sown before the couples went to the altar.

Now please do not be discouraged by those numbers. At the outset it seems to be telling us that certain marriages are doomed to failure, and there is nothing a couple can do. But

we need to reconsider that conclusion. This research, while showing us marriages which might fall apart, does not suggest that there is nothing we can do about it. This research simply shows us what behaviors can be changed and warns us what will probably happen if we are unwilling or unable to change. As the book of James reminds us, it is not enough to just believe something, we must act upon it (James 1:25, 2:15-18, 3:13).

Since knowing precedes acting, it is necessary to discuss these four negative risk factors that can be barriers to oneness, for oneness is God's design for marriage. Genesis 2:24 says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." When Jesus was confronted by the scribes and Pharisees about the issue of divorce, He brought them back to this foundational truth and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:5-6).

Escalation

According to the research done over the last two decades, negative patterns can destroy a relationship. Couples who want to save their marriage need to focus on changing these negative behavior patterns. There are four such patterns I will discuss here, the first of which is escalation.

According to the researchers, "escalation occurs when partners respond back and forth negatively to each other, continually upping the ante so the conversation gets more and more hostile."{1} 1 Peter 3:9 says, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult." But this is exactly what happens with escalation. Each negative comment increases the level of anger and frustration, and soon a small disagreement blows up into a major fight.

Research shows that couples who have a good marriage are less prone to escalation. And if the argument starts to escalate, they are able to stop the negative process before it erupts into a full-blown fight. Marriages that will have problems, and even fail, find that arguments escalate so that such damaging things are said that they may even threaten the lifeblood of the marriage.

Escalation can develop in two different ways. The first is a major shouting fight that may erupt over a conflict as small as putting the cap back on the toothpaste. As the battle heats up the partners get more and more angry, saying mean things about each other. Frequently there are threats to end the relationship. Over time those angry words damage oneness, and angry threats to leave begin to seem like prophecy. Once negative comments are made, they are hard to take back and drive a knife into the partner's heart. Proverbs 12:18 says, "Reckless words pierce like a sword."

These reckless words can do great damage to a marriage because when an argument escalates, every comment and vulnerability becomes fair game. Concerns, failings, and past mistakes can now be used by the attacking partner. Oneness and intimacy can be shattered quickly by a few reckless words.

You may be thinking, "we don't fight like cats and dogs." And while that may be true, your marriage may still have this risk factor. Damaging escalation is not always dramatic. Voices do not have to be raised for couples to get into a cycle of returning negative for negative. Conflict over paying the rent, taking out the garbage, running errands that result in muttering to oneself, rolling your eyes, or throwing up your hands can also be examples of escalation.

Couples who escalate arguments must control their emotions and control their tongues. James writes, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless"

(James 1:26). Couples who want a strong marriage must learn to counteract the tendency to escalate as a couple. The key to a strong and stable marriage is learning to control your emotions and learning how to keep a rein on your tongue.

Invalidation

Having covered escalation, I will now turn to the second of the four negative risk factors to oneness. This risk factor is called invalidation. "Invalidation is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other."{2}

Invalidation can take many forms. Sometimes it can be caustic, in which one partner (or both) attacks the other person verbally. You can hear, and even feel, the contempt one partner has for another.

Sarcastic phrases like "Well, I'm sorry I'm not perfect like you" or "I forgot how lucky I am to be married to you" can cut like a knife. These are attacks on the person's character and personality that easily destroy a marriage. Research has found that invalidation is one of the best predictors of future problems and divorce.

Jesus taught that attacks on the character of another person are sinful and harmful. "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matt. 5:22). Calling a person worthless or empty-headed (which is what the Aramaic term *raca* means) is not what a Christian should do.

Invalidation can also be much more subtle. It may involve an argument where contempt for the other partner is not so obvious. One partner may merely be putting the other partner down for his or her feelings. The message conveyed is that

your feelings do not matter. A husband may put his wife down because she is more emotional or because she is more easily hurt by comments. A husband may invalidate a wife's fears about the children's safety. A wife may invalidate a husband's desire to succeed in the company, saying that it really doesn't matter if he becomes district manager. Ultimately the partner receiving these comments begins to share less and less so that the intimate level of sharing evaporates. When this happens, oneness is lost.

Sometimes invalidation may be nothing more than trite cliches like "It's not so bad" or "Just trust in the Lord." While the sayings may be true, they invalidate the pain or concern of the other partner. They make the other partner feel like their fears or frustration are inappropriate. This kind of invalidation is what Solomon called "singing songs to a heavy heart" (Prov. 25:20). When one partner is hurting, the other partner should find words of encouragement that do not invalidate his or her pain or concerns.

The antidote to invalidation is validation. Couples must work at validating and accepting the feelings of their spouse. That does not mean you have to agree with your spouse on the issue at hand, but it does mean that you listen to and respect the other person's perspective. Providing care, concern, and comfort will build intimacy. Invalidating fears and feelings will build barriers in a marriage. Discipline yourself to encourage your spouse without invalidating his or her feelings.

Negative Interpretations

So far we have looked at the negative risk factors of escalation and invalidation. The third risk factor is negative interpretations. "Negative interpretations occur when one partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case."{3}

Such behavior can be a very destructive pattern in a relationship, and quickly erode intimacy and oneness in a marriage. A wife may believe that her husband does not like her parents. As a result, she may attack him anytime he is not overly enthusiastic about visiting them. He may be concerned with the financial cost of going home for Christmas or about whether he has enough vacation time. She, in turn, considers his behavior as disliking her parents.

When a relationship becomes more distressed, the negative interpretations mount and help create an environment of hopelessness. The attacked partner gives up trying to make himself or herself clear and becomes demoralized.

Another kind of negative interpretation is mind reading. “Mind reading occurs when you assume you know what your partner is thinking or why he or she did something.” Nearly everyone is guilty of mind reading at some time or other. And when you mind read positively, it does not tend to do much harm. But when you mind read on the negative side, it can spell trouble for a marriage.

Paul warned against attempting to judge the thoughts and motives of others (1 Cor. 4:5). And Jesus asked, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41).

Negative interpretations are hard to detect and counteract. Research shows that in distressed marriages there is a tendency for partners to discount the positive things they see, attributing them to causes such as chance rather than to positive characteristics of the partner. That is why negative interpretations do not change easily.

The key to battling negative interpretations is to reconsider what you think about your partner’s motives. Perhaps your partner is more positive than you think. This is not some unrealistic “positive thinking” program, but a realistic

assessment of negative assumptions you may be bringing to the marriage.

Did your spouse really forget to do what you asked? Was it intentional or accidental? Does he or she try to annoy you or are you being more critical than is warranted? Most of the time, people think they are doing the best they can. It hurts to be accused of something you never intended to be hurtful. For couples to have a good marriage this pattern of negative interpretation must be eliminated.

Often this is easier said than done. First, you have to ask yourself if your thinking might be overly negative. Do you give your spouse the benefit of the doubt? Second, you have to push yourself to look for evidence that is contrary to your negative interpretation. Often it is easier to see his or her speck than your own plank. Give your mate the benefit of the doubt rather than let inaccurate interpretations sabotage your marriage.

Withdrawal and Avoidance

Escalation, invalidation, and negative interpretations are three of the four negative risk factors identified by researchers at the University of Denver. The last of these has two descriptors: withdrawal and avoidance. These are two different manifestations of the problem wherein a partner is unwilling to get in or stay in a discussion that is too threatening.

“Withdrawal can be as obvious as getting up and leaving the room or as subtle as ‘turning off’ or ‘shutting down’ during an argument. The withdrawer often tends to get quiet during an argument, look away, or agree quickly to a partner’s suggestion just to end the conversation, with no real intention of following through.”{4}

“Avoidance reflects the same reluctance to get into certain

discussions, with more emphasis on the attempt to not let the conversation happen in the first place. A person prone to avoidance would prefer that the topic not come up and, if it does, may manifest the signs of withdrawal just described."{5}

In a typical marriage, one partner is the pursuer and the other is the withdrawer. Studies show that it is usually the man who wants to avoid these discussions and is more likely in the withdrawing role. However, sometimes the roles reverse. But, for the sake of this discussion, we will assume that the husband is the one who withdraws.

Why does he withdraw? Because he does not feel emotionally safe to stay in the argument. Sometimes he may even be afraid that if he stays in the discussion or argument that he might turn violent, so he retreats.

When the husband withdraws, the wife feels shut out and believes that he does not care about the marriage. In other words, lack of talking equals lack of caring. But that is often a negative interpretation about the withdrawer.

He, on the other hand, may believe that his wife gets upset too much of the time, nagging and picking fights. This is also a negative interpretation because most pursuers really want to stay connected and resolve the issue he does not want to talk about.

Couples who want to have a good marriage must learn to stay engaged. Paul said, writing to the church in Ephesus, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:25-27).

Although the immediate context in this passage is anger, the broader principle is the importance of not allowing avoidance to become a corrosive pattern in your marriage. Couples should

build oneness and intimacy by speaking openly and honestly about important issues in their marriage.

Conclusion

Each of these four risk factors (escalation, invalidation, negative interpretations, and withdrawal and avoidance) can build barriers in a marriage leading ultimately to loneliness and isolation. The research shows that couples that want a good marriage need to eliminate these risk factors from their marriage, or else the negative factors will overwhelm the positive aspects of the marriage. It is never too late to put your marriage back on track.

For further study on this topic, I would once again recommend that you purchase the book *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage.* This book is widely available and is a good source for help in establishing and maintaining the oneness that God desires for every marriage.

Notes

1. Scott Stanley, et al. *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1998), p. 29.
2. Stanley, p. 32.
3. Stanley, p. 35-36.
4. Stanley, p. 40.
5. Stanley, p. 40-41.

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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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