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DAY OF PRAYER
JUNE 6, 2020



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2020
PLANBOOK



REACHING FAMILIES FOR JESUS

MAKING DISCIPLES

— WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER —



Hope for Today's Families

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Texts

LUKE 8:40-56

(MATT. 9:18-26; MARK 5:21-43)

I. Introduction

Our world today is overflowing with religious conflicts and war, political polarization, refugees seeking safety, migrants fleeing despotic regimes, abject poverty, aging populations, economic distress, food and water insecurity, housing insecurity, lack of access to basic education, climate change, an increase in alternative family formations, debilitating and terminal illnesses, and much more.

Developing healthy families in this context is among the most challenging tasks human beings can undertake. Even when people are deliberate about developing healthy family relationships it is still challenging—despite our best intentions—because we are all human, and every human being is imperfect. Our failings make it very difficult to sustain healthy relationships.

Despite the difficulty of life in relationships there is *Hope for Today's Families*: from

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Abidjan to Aberdeen; from Berrien Springs to Buenos Aires; from Cairo to Cape Town; from Florence to Freetown; from Haifa to Hanoi; from Moscow to Mumbai; from Nairobi to New York City; from Sydney to Shanghai; from Taipei to Tegucigalpa; from Zanzibar to Zabrze; much can change for the better when we trust God to give us the patience, kindness, and love He wants us to have in our relationships, regardless of where in the world we live. As we embrace God's reasons for creating the family, it is possible to have stronger and healthier family relationships.

Our topic today is titled “**Hope for Today's Families.**” Let us pray.

II. The Text: Luke 8:40-56 A Girl Restored to Life and A Woman Healed

SO IT WAS, WHEN JESUS RETURNED, THAT THE MULTITUDE WELCOMED HIM, FOR THEY WERE ALL WAITING FOR HIM. AND BEHOLD, THERE CAME A MAN NAMED JAIRUS, AND HE WAS A RULER OF THE SYNAGOGUE. AND HE FELL DOWN AT JESUS' FEET AND BEGGED HIM TO COME TO HIS HOUSE, FOR HE HAD AN ONLY DAUGHTER ABOUT TWELVE YEARS OF AGE, AND SHE WAS DYING. BUT AS HE WENT,

THE MULTITUDE THROGGED HIM. NOW A WOMAN, HAVING A FLOW OF BLOOD FOR TWELVE YEARS, WHO HAD SPENT ALL HER LIVELIHOOD ON PHYSICIANS AND COULD NOT BE HEALED BY ANY, CAME FROM BEHIND AND TOUCHED THE BORDER OF HIS GARMENT. AND IMMEDIATELY HER FLOW OF BLOOD STOPPED. AND JESUS SAID, "WHO TOUCHED ME? WHEN ALL DENIED IT, PETER AND THOSE WITH HIM SAID, "MASTER, THE MULTITUDES THROGG AND PRESS YOU, AND YOU SAY, 'WHO TOUCHED ME?' BUT JESUS SAID, 'SOMEBODY TOUCHED ME, FOR I PERCEIVED POWER GOING OUT FROM ME.' NOW WHEN THE WOMAN SAW THAT SHE WAS NOT HIDDEN, SHE CAME TREMBLING; AND FALLING DOWN BEFORE HIM, SHE DECLARED TO HIM IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL THE PEOPLE THE REASON SHE HAD TOUCHED HIM AND HOW SHE WAS HEALED IMMEDIATELY. AND HE SAID TO HER, 'DAUGHTER, BE OF GOOD CHEER; YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL. GO IN PEACE.' WHILE HE WAS STILL SPEAKING, SOMEONE CAME FROM THE RULER OF THE SYNAGOGUE'S HOUSE, SAYING TO HIM, 'YOUR DAUGHTER IS DEAD. DO NOT TROUBLE THE TEACHER.' BUT WHEN JESUS HEARD IT HE ANSWERED HIM, SAYING, 'DO NOT BE AFRAID, ONLY BELIEVE, AND SHE WILL BE MADE WELL.' WHEN HE CAME INTO THE HOUSE, HE PERMITTED NO ONE TO GO IN EXCEPT PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN, AND THE FATHER AND MOTHER OF THE GIRL. NOW ALL WEPT AND MOURNED FOR HER; BUT HE SAID, 'DO NOT WEEP; SHE IS NOT DEAD, BUT SLEEPING.' AND THEY RIDICULED HIM, KNOWING THAT SHE WAS DEAD. BUT HE PUT THEM ALL OUTSIDE, TOOK HER BY THE HAND AND CALLED, SAYING, 'LITTLE GIRL, ARISE.' THEN HER SPIRIT RETURNED, AND SHE AROSE IMMEDIATELY. AND HE COMMANDED THAT SHE BE GIVEN SOMETHING TO EAT. AND HER PARENTS WERE ASTONISHED, BUT HE

CHARGED THEM TO TELL NO ONE WHAT HAD HAPPENED.
(LUKE 8:40-56 ESV)

III. Explication And Application

The context of this narrative finds Jesus on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee—probably in Capernaum—having just recently been in Gergesa,¹ a place on the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. It was in the country of the Gadarenes or Gergesenes (today's Golan Heights), where Jesus had recently healed a demon possessed man, according to Luke (Luke 8:26-27) and Mark's (Mark 5:1-2) accounts. Matthew (Matthew 5:28) claims there were two demon possessed men. With compassion Jesus cast out the demons who begged to be allowed into a herd of pigs (Luke 8:31-33). This action caused fear and anger in the people of that place who then urged Jesus to get out of their country and leave them alone.

It is possible the people on the Western shore of Galilee had heard about the wonderful miracles Jesus had just performed and wished for Him to do great things among them as well. Or, perhaps, they simply wanted to see the man who had accomplished such outstanding wonders to be able to boast to their friends that they had been with Him. Whatever the case, the biblical account declares in Luke 8:40 "the multitude welcomed Him."

A prominent man of great reputation and wealth and an unassuming woman—on the Western bank—carried their own heavy burdens and were among those who welcomed the presence of Jesus. The man's name is given—Jairus—but the woman is anonymous. Jairus was an affluent leader of the synagogue who with humility and courage came to Jesus to plead for the life of his child, even as his temple colleagues plotted to kill Jesus. She on the other hand was humble, a poor woman who had exhausted all her money attempting to get well, only to see her condition grow worse. She was desperately hoping to get assistance for herself. Jairus was

gratified for the twelve years of happiness he enjoyed with his daughter, but now he might lose her at any moment. The woman had endured twelve years of despair because of her condition; but was hoping Jesus could make her well.²

At once Jesus set out with Jairus for his home. And, while the disciples had experienced this gracious response from Jesus in the past, they were a bit alarmed by how amenable Jesus was to the request of the arrogant rabbi. Still, they went along with Jesus as the crowd followed enthusiastically and hopeful.

Although the home of Jairus was not far from where he had found the Master, progress was very slow because of the very large crowd of people pressing Jesus on every side. While the anxious father was concerned about the very slow progress being made; at regular intervals Jesus stopped to help someone in need or to bring consolation to a person in distress.

As they traveled to the ruler's home a messenger pushed through the crowd with bad news for Jairus. His daughter had died so it was no use to trouble Jesus anymore. However, Jesus heard the message and immediately reached out with comfort to the brokenhearted father, saying: "Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well" (Luke 8:50).³

The scene at the ruler's home was already one that would break any father's heart. The professional mourners were already onsite weeping and wailing, and a group of neighbors, relatives, and friends were also by this time there. The Jews of the day engaged quickly in sharing and showing their grief, given that the body was expected to be buried the same day after being washed and anointed.⁴

Put off by the noise, Jesus tried to quiet the crowd by telling them that the girl was not dead but sleeping. You can bet that this did not go over well with all those at the scene. Since for Jesus death is but a sleep,

He was being absolutely truthful in His statement. But the assembled group ridiculed Jesus because to them the girl was really dead. They did not realize that Jesus was "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). After all, was it not Jesus who had raised the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-15)? Had He not told John the Baptist that the dead were being raised (Luke 7:22)? Clearly, the mourners didn't believe these reports and thought Jesus to be a charlatan and a fool.

After moving everyone out of the house, Jesus took Peter, James, John, and the father and mother of the dead girl, into her room. Taking her by the hand, Jesus spoke to her in Aramaic, the language spoken at that home: "Talitha cumi! Little girl, arise!" These were not magic words but a command from the life-giver.⁵ Ellen White describes the subsequent this way: "Instantly a tremor passed through the unconscious form. The pulses of life beat again. The lips unclosed with a smile. The eyes opened widely as if from sleep, and the maiden gazed with wonder on the group beside her. She arose, and her parents clasped her in their arms and wept for joy."⁶

Of course, on the way to Jairus' home Jesus came in contact with a woman in the crowd. For twelve long years she had suffered with a disease that had made her life incredibly miserable. She was ceremonially unclean and felt physically inferior, unable to find spiritual fellowship with believers because her condition precluded her from making contact with them or making it to the synagogue each week. Her limited finances were spent on physicians and esoteric remedies without success.

In spite of her long night of trial, hope renewed in her heart one day when she heard about what Jesus had done for others. She was persuaded that if she could find Him she would finally be healed. Faint, feeble, and frail, she came to the Galilean shore where Jesus was teaching, attempting to press through the crowd without success. Her hope was beginning to wane when by

some providence of God, Jesus made His way through the multitude and came near where she was. In one last desperate move the suffering woman lunged in the direction of Jesus with what appears to be her very last ounce of verve and managed to barely touch the hem of His clothing. Instantly it happened! The feeling of being dry! Strength replaced weakness. Overwhelming joy swapped places with grief! Peace, tranquility, serenity, unspeakable ecstasy and happiness invaded her soul!

With a heart filled with gratitude and indescribable euphoria, the woman made an about-face from the crowd. With newfound vitality she was confident that she could quietly disappear and live the rest of her years with joy, peace, and freedom from the illness that had imprisoned her for so many years. But the voice of Jesus pierced the din of the crowd.

“Who touched Me?” He asked. You can imagine the look of amazement in the collective faces of the crowd. *Is He joking? Is He really asking that question? With all the people pressing about Him and He is asking who touched Him?* Peter, the impulsive and impetuous one; the one lacking emotional intelligence responded to Jesus with attitude in his voice. Looking incredulously at Jesus, Peter wondered, “Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, ‘Who touched Me?’” (Luke 8:45). Jesus disregarded Peter’s somewhat mocking question and declared: “Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me” (Luke 8:46).

Intending to remain anonymous—a reality Jesus does not accept from anyone who comes to Him—rather wanting to affirm personhood and the unique qualities every human being has been endowed with from their Creator; desiring for this insecure and anxiety ridden woman to become assertive, confident, and self-assured; Jesus created an occasion for real interaction and communion, which this poor woman had lost for twelve long years. Sensing the spotlight on her, the now healed woman came forward

and confessed in public what had transpired in her life and what occurred when her need intersected the abundance of Jesus. “She was defiled, destitute, discouraged, and desperate; but she came to Jesus and her need was met.”⁷ It is one thing to *press* Jesus; it is another thing to *touch* Him.

IV. Conclusion

In a study published in the October 2011 issue of *Nature Neuroscience*,⁸ researchers at the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging at University College London present evidence that people who are naturally optimistic learn only from information that reinforces that rosy outlook. The study actually suggests that many of us are hardwired for optimism as well. Some reporters have shorthanded this finding to describe *optimism as a “brain defect.”* Brain defect or not, optimism seems necessary for personal progress. *We have to be able to imagine better realities*, to press ourselves toward that goal.

Hope, however, is more than optimism. Biblically speaking, hope, along with faith and love, make up the “big three” of Christianity. They are the things that the apostle Paul spoke about in 1 Corinthians 13 that remain when all else fails. “And now faith, hope, and love *abide*,” is how he puts it, and he meant that when we look for the qualities that are distilled from the experience of the believing life together, these three things are the solid footing on which we stand—even if seen now only darkly as through a distorting glass.

What is your need today? Will it take humility and courage to approach it, such as that displayed by Jairus—an arrogant, big-headed, conceited, and self-righteous rabbi whose daughter was dying and in need of the *Resurrection* and the *Life*? Or are you like the anonymous woman who suffered in silence—avoided, ignored, rejected and shunned? Will it take renewed hope, not merely worldly optimism, but a real belief and confidence in God’s promises found in the Bible? Are you

still captives of hope? Does hope still burn within your hearts?

Jesus is walking through your village today and with Him comes healing for every dreadful disease, even when death has already become a reality. Regardless of what you are facing in your relationships today, remember there is still **Hope for Today's Families** through Jesus Christ our Lord. Trust Him today, tomorrow, and forever; and make Him the Lord of your life.

May God bless you to this end is our prayer.

Notes

- ¹ White, E.G. (1940). *The Desire of Ages*. p. 342
Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- ² Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Vol. 1, p.202). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ³ White, E.G. (1940). *The Desire of Ages*. p. 342
Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- ⁴ Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Vol. 1, p.203). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ⁵ Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Vol. 1, p.203). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ⁶ White, E.G. (1940). *The Desire of Ages*. p. 343
Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- ⁷ Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Vol. 1, p.204). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ⁸ (2011). *Nature Neuroscience*, vol. 106 (3), 1601-2103.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance in Christ

KAGELO AND BOITUMELO RAKWENA

Texts

JEREMIAH 1:4-10; JEREMIAH 29:11-13
 “THEN THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO ME, SAYING: ‘BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW YOU; BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I SANCTIFIED YOU; I ORDAINED YOU A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS.’ THEN SAID I: ‘AH, LORD GOD! BEHOLD, I CANNOT SPEAK, FOR I AM A YOUTH.’ BUT THE LORD SAID TO ME: ‘DO NOT SAY, “I AM A YOUTH,” FOR YOU SHALL GO TO ALL TO WHOM I SEND YOU, AND WHATEVER I COMMAND YOU, YOU SHALL SPEAK. DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEIR FACES, FOR I AM WITH YOU,’ SAYS THE LORD. THEN THE LORD PUT FORTH HIS HAND AND TOUCHED MY MOUTH, AND THE LORD SAID TO ME: ‘BEHOLD, I HAVE PUT MY WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH. SEE, I HAVE THIS DAY SET YOU OVER THE NATIONS AND OVER THE KINGDOMS, TO ROOT OUT AND TO PULL DOWN, TO DESTROY AND TO THROW DOWN, TO BUILD AND TO PLANT.’”

“FOR I KNOW THE THOUGHTS THAT I THINK TOWARD YOU, SAYS THE LORD, THOUGHTS OF PEACE AND NOT OF EVIL,

TO GIVE YOU A FUTURE AND A HOPE.

THEN YOU WILL CALL UPON ME AND GO AND PRAY TO ME, AND I WILL LISTEN TO YOU. AND YOU WILL SEEK ME AND FIND ME, WHEN YOU SEARCH FOR ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.”

Introduction

Reaching one’s full potential will depend on how one views or accepts oneself. Jeremiah 1 introduces a young man hesitant to accept God’s call, unable to go forward in carrying God’s mission until he agreed with God that he was worth more than his excuses; until he began to accept himself in God. We can be high achievers—physicians, professors, engineers, psychologists, etc.—and still have issues with self-esteem and self-acceptance, and hence unable to reach the potential God intended for us. In our work places or in other settings, we see people going through pain and suffering due to lack of self-esteem and self-acceptance, despite their education or status. For most of these individuals, past pain and negative messages continue to control them despite their academic successes.

Therefore, before one is able to go further, it is important to determine self-esteem and self-acceptance in God. Self-esteem is how one feels and thinks about oneself. It is based on other people’s evaluation as well as our own view of ourselves. It can be either negative or positive.

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With self-acceptance, however, this is where one simply says, “I am worth more than my evaluation and people’s evaluation of me, because God values me. Circumstances and people may change, but God does not change in His evaluation of me.”

The Call of Jeremiah

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, to speak on His behalf. Jeremiah instead looked at himself, to his abilities as he thought of the task he was called upon to do, and declared, “Not me.” Said another way, the conversation between God and Jeremiah could sound like this:

God: Knocks at the door of Jeremiah’s house, then...

Jeremiah: “Who is there?”

God: “Jehovah, the God of Israel.”

Jeremiah: “How can I help you?”

God: “I am looking for a prophet. I am calling you to be a prophet to Israel and to other nations, to speak on my behalf to my people, Israel.”

Jeremiah: “You came to the wrong house. Go next door. For I am but a youth and I can’t speak.”

God: “Before you were born, I knew you. Before I formed you in your mother’s womb, I knew you. I set you apart and sanctified you to be a prophet. Jeremiah, you are a man for this time and I am counting on you.”

In this conversation, God answers all of Jeremiah’s excuses and points Jeremiah to Himself, as one who has unlimited resources for His servant. Jeremiah is left to accept God’s call, to accept himself and view himself as heaven views and accepts him. As Jeremiah places himself in the hands of the all-powerful God, he consequently becomes powerful and invincible, as God enables him.

In the same manner, God is saying to each one of us: “You are not an after-thought. You are special and unique, created with a mission, a position to fill. I knew you before you were born and I knew that you would be a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a pastor, a lawyer, etc.” “And

while your father was still thinking about how to propose to your mother, I knew you. And while your mother was wondering whether to say yes to your father’s proposal, I knew you. You are not an accident. You are not a surprise to me.”

God is personal. He addresses each one of us individually. You are His and He is yours. He thinks positively about you (Jeremiah 29:11-13). Further, in Psalms 139:

- 2-3 He knows you very well.
- 7-9 you cannot hide from Him.
- 14 you were created to praise Him.
- 13-18 you were fearfully and wonderfully made; beautiful and handsome (He does not create ugly people).
- You were born with a purpose in God’s mind; born for success.
- You are an asset for mission. You are capable of reaching the sphere of your influence, your family and friends.
- The question is: do you believe God, or do you believe your fears and self-doubt?

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Believing What God Says About You

- In the midst of other voices that may put you down, do you see and value yourself as God sees and values you? By seeing and valuing yourself as God does, you get a sense of belonging, of being accepted and empowered by the merits of God Himself, rather than through what we have done or who we are. It no longer matters where we come from, but rather whom we belong to. As we continue to grow in His grace and love, He continues to mold us for His glory and will.
- In Christ, are you beautiful/handsome (fearfully and wonderfully made), or do you feel sorry for what He did in you? This would change the way you live your life and change your habits to please the One who loves and accepts you.
- As you serve or minister to others, will they see/feel His grace flowing through

you as you have accepted yourself in Christ (giving part of yourself in the process, as you minister to others)? This would change the way you relate to others, family members and friends, seeing them as God's beautiful creation who need to be respected, saved and accepted.

Your Thoughts and Words About Self

- Manage your thoughts and your words about yourself. Think positively and speak positively about yourself. Ellen White states that:

“NO ONE BUT YOURSELF CAN CONTROL YOUR THOUGHTS. IN THE STRUGGLE TO REACH THE HIGHEST STANDARD, SUCCESS OR FAILURE WILL DEPEND MUCH UPON THE CHARACTER AND THE MANNER IN WHICH THE THOUGHTS ARE DISCIPLINED. IF THE THOUGHTS ARE RIGHT, THEN AS A RESULT THE WORDS WILL BE RIGHT; THE ACTIONS WILL BE OF THAT CHARACTER TO BRING GLADNESS AND COMFORT AND REST TO SOULS.” (*OUR HIGH CALLING*, p. 112; *MIND CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY*, VOL. 2, p. 655).

- “The more you talk faith, the more faith you will have. The more you dwell upon discouragement, talking to others about your trials, and enlarging upon them, to enlist the sympathy which you crave, the more discouragements and trials you will have.” (Manuscript 102, 1901).
- Further, Ellen White concludes:

“BUT THE WORDS ARE MORE THAN AN INDICATION OF CHARACTER; THEY HAVE POWER TO REACT ON THE CHARACTER. MEN ARE INFLUENCED BY THEIR OWN WORDS...HAVING ONCE EXPRESSED AN OPINION OR DECISION, THEY ARE OFTEN TOO PROUD TO RETRACT IT, AND TRY TO PROVE THEMSELVES IN THE RIGHT, UNTIL THEY COME TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE.” (*THE DESIRE OF AGES*, p. 323).

- What you say about and to yourself, whether positive or negative, travels to your brain, and the brain then influences the whole being to actualize these concepts.
- Your thoughts and words about yourself should be centered on the word of God and what it says about the value God places on you.
- Do not allow the look of circumstances to determine your worth, whether you succeed or not at what you attempt.
- Words are creative. And you determine your day and your mood by your thoughts and words.

Self-acceptance And Self-respect

- When it comes to self-acceptance and self-respect, Ellen White submits:

“IT IS NOT PLEASING TO GOD THAT YOU SHOULD DEMERIT YOURSELF. YOU SHOULD CULTIVATE SELF-RESPECT BY LIVING SO YOU WILL BE APPROVED BY YOUR OWN CONSCIENCE AND BEFORE MEN AND ANGELS...” THERE IS THEREFORE NOW NO CONDEMNATION TO THEM WHICH ARE IN CHRIST JESUS, WHO WALK NOT AFTER THE FLESH, BUT AFTER THE SPIRIT’ (ROMANS 8:1). WHILE WE SHOULD NOT THINK OF OURSELVES MORE HIGHLY THAN WE OUGHT, THE WORD OF GOD DOES NOT CONDEMN A PROPER SELF-RESPECT. AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD, WE SHOULD HAVE CONSCIOUS DIGNITY OF CHARACTER, IN WHICH PRIDE AND SELF-IMPORTANCE HAVE NO PART.” (*OUR HIGH CALLING*, p.143).

- “When the sunlight of God's love illuminates the darkened chambers of the soul, restlessness and dissatisfaction will cease and satisfying joys will give vigor to the mind and health and energy to the body.” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 247).

- “Man knows not his own value...He who comes to Jesus, he who believes on Him and makes Him his Example, realizes the meaning of the words ‘To them gave He power to become the sons of God.’” (*Mind Character and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 10).
- This would mean that as we accept ourselves in God, as God has accepted us in Christ, we ought to respect ourselves in Christ, respect the price that God paid for our redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. Accepting Christ as our personal Savior changes both our status and our class. We are now kings and queens in the kingdom of God. We are now shining stars in the sky, never meant to be drawn down by the weight of earthliness and its evils.

Challenges Due to Poor Self-acceptance

Poor Self-acceptance Affects:

- *Spiritual Life*: leads to a lifeless spiritual experience, rampant self-doubt, and fears. When God says that you are accepted and loved as you are, you doubt His Word. As a result, doing so unknowingly following the voice of Satan and you unconsciously do his will instead of God's will for your life.
- *Relationship Difficulties*: contributes to feelings of inadequacy, which leads to an inability to love and accept others because of your failure to love and accept yourself.
- *Physical Health Issues*: people with poor self-acceptance are more likely to have high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, poor sleep patterns, anxiety and depression.
- *Emotional and Psychological Problems*: poor self-acceptance affects the brain, creating low levels of cortisol, which contribute to lower levels of frontal lobe functioning, affecting reasoning and decision making. Consequently, impairing our capacity for forgiveness and empathy. Also, when one fails to accept oneself, one develops negative

feelings associated with shame, guilt, lack of confidence, depression and anxiety.

Facing Life Each Day – Prayer

- As you face the challenges of life, having accepted yourself in Christ, your daily prayer is more likely to be: ‘Heavenly father, thank you for Jesus Christ, who is my Savior and friend. As I go into the world today I do so as your beloved daughter/son, may Your Spirit work in me miracles of love, patience and humility, that Christ may be glorified in my life today. I go out to face life as a conqueror, as a victor in Jesus’ name, Amen.’
- There are times when you may have to prostrate yourself before God and declare, “I am nothing without you.” But as you go out to face life and its challenges each morning, go out as a child of God, with hope and courage that God is with you and is interested in your welfare. Internalize His words for you. Believe what He says about you and know that His presence is with you. Let His words direct your thoughts, your words and your actions throughout the day.

Mental Exercise

- Write a list of negative thoughts you are prone to think. For example: “*I am unlovable*,” “*I am ugly*,” “*I can’t do anything right*,” “*I am worthless*.”
- Now write and replace that negative script with a positive one. For instance: “*I am loved and cared for by God*,” “*I am beautiful/handsome, created in the image of God*,” and “*I am somebody, special and unique, God has given me talents and gifts*.”
- Now take this positive script and let a close family, friend, or neighbor say it or read it to you.

May God bless you to this end is my prayer.

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Rivers in the Desert

RON AND LISA CLOUZET

The Texts

ISA 43:5-7; 18-19; JOHN 4:1-42;
JOHN 7:38; ZECH 9:12

Message

When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.

Introduction

The prophet Isaiah was closing in on almost 50 years of ministry. He had already served under kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isa 1:1). His words were listened to because the Lord God of heaven spoke through His servant. And now, he would speak for God one last time, but this time things seemed hopeless.

King Manasseh, perhaps the worst king Judah had ever had, had risen to the throne. The Bible says Manasseh rebuilt the high places of pagan worship his father had torn down. He erected altars to Baal and Astarte, “and worshiped all the hosts of heaven.” He even built pagan altars dedicated to demons inside

God’s temple in Jerusalem! Manasseh practiced witchcraft and sorcery, engaged with mediums and spiritualists, and even sacrificed his sons in the fire for the sake of strange deities (2 Chron 33:1-9). In 2 Chronicles, chapter 33, we read in verse 2, that Manasseh did “evil in the sight of the Lord.” In verse 6 we read that he did “much evil,” and in verse 9 we’re told he did “more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel.” That’s not a good trend—evil, much evil, more evil.

In his old age, the prophet Isaiah had plenty of reasons to feel discouraged. The worst possible king was currently leading God’s people. Days were dark. The Assyrians had already taken the northern tribes—Israel—captive because of their unfaithfulness to God. Judah was getting very close to the same destiny. It wouldn’t be the Assyrians this time, but the Babylonians who would plunder Judah and take their sons and daughters to exile. Since God’s people did not respond to Him in times of prosperity, God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, would try yet again by allowing them times of adversity.

Was all hope lost that Israel could be redeemed?

The Promise of Isaiah

At this point in Judah’s history is when Isaiah wrote some of his most wonderful

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prophecies. Isaiah 40 to 66 is so full of hope that scholars have for years doubted this could come from the same author. They call this section of Isaiah “Second Isaiah,” as if this was a different prophet. But it wasn’t. This was the same man that responded to God’s call in his youth (Isa 6:1-8). And in the worst of times, he wrote the best of words.

“FEAR NOT, FOR I AM WITH YOU; I WILL BRING YOUR DESCENDANTS FROM THE EAST, [FROM BABYLON AND MEDO-PERSIA] AND GATHER YOU FROM THE WEST [FROM GREECE]; I WILL SAY TO THE NORTH, ‘GIVE THEM UP!’ [THE NORTH: THE SELEUCID KINGS] AND TO THE SOUTH, ‘DO NOT KEEP THEM BACK!’ [THE SOUTH: THE PTOLEMAIC KINGS] BRING MY SONS FROM AFAR, AND MY DAUGHTERS FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH— EVERYONE WHO IS CALLED BY MY NAME, WHOM I HAVE CREATED FOR MY GLORY; I HAVE FORMED HIM, YES, I HAVE MADE HIM.”
ISAIAH 43:5-7

One hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took the Jews captive, God prophesied through Isaiah that He would bring them back. Not only them, but also other captives from future enemies.

Do you know people who are captives of the enemy? Do you have loved ones right now who are not walking with the Lord, who seem distracted with the world or consumed with worry or overwhelmed by the cares of life? Have you been praying for those close to your heart, day after day, week after week, month after month, even year after year without apparent results? Do not despair: *when our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.* God knows what He is capable of. He loves those whom we love with an undying love. Though even we may forget, from time to time, He will never forget them. As Isaiah said, they are all “inscribed . . . on the palms of [His] hands” (Isa 49:16).

How can we know God is at work when we fail to see our loved ones return home?

We know it because of what Isaiah says later in that same chapter. Isaiah 43:18-19:

“DO NOT REMEMBER THE FORMER THINGS, NOR CONSIDER THE THINGS OF OLD. BEHOLD, I WILL DO A NEW THING, NOW IT SHALL SPRING FORTH; SHALL YOU NOT KNOW IT? I WILL EVEN MAKE A ROAD IN THE WILDERNESS AND RIVERS IN THE DESERT.”

Rivers in the desert? A road in the wilderness? What is that about?

The Promise Realized

God is alluding to His mighty acts in the past. When the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God in His mercy made a pathway for them through the Red Sea. But that was “the former things. . . the things of old.” He is now planning “a new thing.” Instead of causing dry land in the midst of the sea for Israel to cross to freedom, He will make rivers in the desert for Judah to return home from Babylon. You see, Babylon was East of Palestine, in modern-day Iraq. But in between those lands was forbidding territory: such dry desert and mountains that anyone attempting to cross it would certainly perish. Instead, anyone coming from the east or going there had to go north. They had to circumvent the desert. But God, who is not limited by anything, promises a “river” road through the midst of the desert, in order to get home more quickly.

A beloved servant of the Lord, Ellen White, once wrote: “Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme, will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before their feet” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 481). In other words, when we run out of options, God still has many at His disposal. And when it comes to bringing people back to Him, He still has plenty left

in His arsenal. Here is another “thousand ways” promise: “What is it that brings man to repentance? It is Jesus Christ. How does He bring man to repentance? There are a thousand ways that He may do this” (*Faith and Works*, p. 64).

I often think and pray with this in mind: “Lord,” I pray, “use one of Your thousand ways to help my beloved ones open their eyes to see their need of you. You have many ways to accomplish this. Use one of them for their sake!”

Our vision is very limited. We see just what is in front of us; and even then, we often misinterpret what we actually see. But God sees in front, in back, on each conceivable side, and beyond for miles and millennia. He sees all there is to see to assess the situation. And even though He will not bend the will of human beings to follow Him, He can work effectively all around them to help them see what He sees so well.

Years ago, one of us was walking early in the morning, thinking about what the psalmist had said in the longest of the psalms: “You established the earth, and it abides. They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants” (Ps 119:90-91). The verse is talking about Creation and the fact that the laws of creation continue to obey Him to this day. Why? Such laws are His servants. In another version it simply reads: “All things are Your servants.”

God will not infringe on the will of our loved ones. He will not force His love and grace upon any who refuse to accept it. But everything else that surrounds them is subject to His command. “All things” are His servants. That’s why He knows of a thousand ways available to solve problems. *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

The Woman of Samaria

In John 4, we are told about a time when Jesus needed to travel from Judea in the

south to Galilee in the north. Between Judea and Galilee was Samaria. Hundreds of years before, Samaria was the central area of the northern tribes of Israel who walked away from God and adopted the customs of pagan nations following other gods. When the Jews came back from Babylon, they were cured from idolatry, and they determined that what happened to the Samaritans would never happen to them. They grew to despise the Samaritans. They considered them worse than the Gentiles—and they called the Gentiles dogs!

So, in Christ’s time, no self-respecting Jew would willingly walk through Samaria. The quickest route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria. Instead, however, they would walk east, cross the Jordan, and walk north through Perea—a foreign land—until they crossed the river again to enter Galilee.

Jesus often did what no one expected, or even understood, at the time. But He was guided through His ministry by the Holy Spirit (Matt 4:1, 17). He walked through Samaria and His disciples obediently followed. When He reached the outskirts of a town called Sychar at noon, it was hot, and He was thirsty. While His disciples went to town to get some food, He rested by the city’s well. You probably know the story. A Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. This caught the attention of Jesus because the time to draw water was either early in the morning or evening, never at noon. And it was a social practice: women did this together. But this woman was alone, and clearly, she was avoiding other women.

As the story unfolds (John 4:1-42), we learn that the woman had had relationships with five different men and the relationship she was involved in at the time was with someone who was not her husband. That may be one reason why she avoided other women. It became obvious to Jesus that she was very alone, ostracized, and very lost, even in her own city. So, the Master offered *her* water: “Whoever drinks of this water [from the well] will thirst again,” He said, “but whoever

drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (vv.13-14).

The story ends on a glorious note. The woman accepts Jesus as the Messiah, thus drinking from the true Well of Life, and in turn she *becomes* “a fountain of water” as she eagerly shares with others what she learned from the Savior! John recalls that “many” people from the city believed in Jesus “because of the word of the woman” (v.39). Her life was dry, ready to expire. But in a single conversation, God awakened the woman to a new beginning. She saw what she’d never seen before. And she grabbed on to the hope that Jesus offered to her.

This can happen with our children who are far from home. This can happen with our siblings wandering “in the desert.” This can happen with our loved ones seemingly lost in the world. In one sensible conversation with Jesus, they can become “rivers of living water.” Isn’t that what Jesus said? “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

Coming Home

In one of his books, Roger Morneau tells of a couple who had separated four years before. The man was talented and worked for a multinational corporation. As he was given more and more responsibilities at work, he stayed away from home more and more. He began to adopt the lifestyle of the corporate world, including partying, drinking, and buying expensive jewelry. He stopped going to church, criticized those who did, and argued with his wife all the time. Eventually, he began having an affair with his secretary, and moved out of the home.

His drinking turned to gambling and then to drug use. He made some poor decisions at work which cost the company a lot of money,

and they fired him. His life now a mess, he seriously thought about committing suicide, but decided he was too much of a coward to carry it through.

What would you do if you were the wife? What *could* she do but pray? And that’s just what she did. She realized that only the mighty power of the Holy Spirit could overturn her estranged husband’s life. One evening, while cooking, she heard a familiar voice on the TV. A reporter was interviewing a homeless man living under a highway overpass. It was her husband. She could hardly recognize him! The former corporate executive was reduced to eating food from garbage cans behind restaurants.

The woman learned where the interview had taken place and went looking for her husband. She found him inside an 8- by 10-foot shack, lying on a pile of broken-down cardboard boxes. She begged him to come home, but all he could think of was how far he had fallen. His mind was deeply affected. He was seriously depressed. After numerous visits, he agreed to come home, but he still lived like a tramp.

She began to pray for Jesus to heal his mind. It took some time to see results, but they came. The man eventually decided to clean himself up, to cut his hair, and to look again for a job. Today, they are together again and have moved to another city to begin a new life, after four years in “the wilderness.”

Jesus never forgot that man. He knew where he was, He knew what he endured, He knew the depth of his own despair. At the right time, and since all things are His servants, He led his wife to recognize her husband’s voice on TV. *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

Do not despair. Do not give up. Jesus will do “a new thing” in your midst! He will make a river in the desert to speed up the return of your exiled son, your daughter, your brother, your sister, or your friend. *He* will bring them back! He will do so for the honor of His name

and the benefit of His people. *He* will never leave them nor forsake them! (Heb 13:5). *When our loved ones are far from home, Jesus is still at work to bring them back.*

“RETURN TO THE STRONGHOLD, YOU PRISONERS OF HOPE. EVEN TODAY I DECLARE THAT I WILL RESTORE DOUBLE TO YOU.” ZECHARIAH 9:12

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Marriage: A Divine Design

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Introduction

As God was completing the end of the sixth day of Creation, He looked over all that He had created and saw that “it was good” (Genesis 1:25). Then God created Adam in His image, but this time He said “it is not good,” (Genesis 2:18). In spite of all that Adam possessed—beauty, wealth, health and power—God declared it was not good enough (Mueller & De Souza, 2015).

SO THE LORD GOD CAUSED A DEEP SLEEP TO FALL UPON THE MAN, AND WHILE HE SLEPT GOD TOOK ONE OF HIS RIBS AND CLOSED IT UP WITH FLESH; AND THE RIB WHICH THE LORD GOD HAD TAKEN FROM MAN HE MADE INTO A WOMAN AND BROUGHT HER TO THE MAN. THEN THE MAN SAID, ‘THIS AT LAST IS BONE OF MY BONES AND FLESH OF MY FLESH; SHE SHALL BE CALLED WOMAN, BECAUSE SHE WAS TAKEN OUT OF MAN.’ THEREFORE, A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER AND HOLD FAST TO HIS WIFE, AND THEY SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. AND THE MAN AND HIS WIFE WERE BOTH NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED (GENESIS 2:21-25, ESV).

So it was that the God, the Creator, performed the very first wedding at the culmination of Creation week. Then, “God saw everything that he made and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

This passage of scripture lays the foundation for a Christian view of marriage. Marriage is the first institution designed by God. Great institutions remain in place when there is a clear understanding of their origin, nature and purpose. In Part 1 of this seminar we will give an overview of God’s original intent for marriage. Part 2 will offer essential principles for building and maintaining a strong and healthy marriage; one that is based on God’s original design.

PART 1

Marriage: An Order of Creation¹

When we read the Creation story, we clearly see that marriage was a part of the order of events in the Creation week. This is very significant for a Christian worldview of marriage because it is a departure from a contemporary view of marriage. Marriage, as designed by God, is not rooted in an evolutionary process or one socially constructed by human beings. It was purposefully orchestrated and planned by the Creator.

Marriage is not just any relationship; it is the foundation of all relationships—first with God,

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then with each other. The notion of human bonding was first understood and reflected in the marriage relationship. Adam and Eve were the first couple and they established the first family. All of us first learn about relationships from our families, whether that family be biological, adopted, or foster. Some of these relationships were good and some not so good. But the point is, all relationships begin within the family.

The family is not only a cornerstone of society, it is the foundation of society. It is so much a part of society's foundation that civil laws designed to protect marriage and the family have been enacted. History has revealed that strong nations are built on strong and stable marriages and families.

“SOCIETY IS COMPOSED OF FAMILIES AND IS WHAT THE HEADS OF FAMILIES MAKE IT. OUT OF THE HEART ARE THE ‘ISSUES OF LIFE’; AND THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY, OF THE CHURCH, AND OF THE NATION IS THE HOUSEHOLD. THE WELL-BEING OF SOCIETY, THE SUCCESS OF THE CHURCH, THE PROSPERITY OF THE NATION, DEPEND UPON HOME INFLUENCES.”
(WHITE, 2001)

While marriage is God's ideal, we must also recognize that sometimes the ideal does not work out as planned. However, people of faith must continue to stretch toward God's ideal plan for marriage and family, while recognizing that there is brokenness experienced in marriages and families in a fallen world. While holding up the ideal we continue to extend the “good news of God's saving grace and the promise of growth possible” through the power of Christ.²

The Nature of Marriage

Oneness

Marriage defies mathematics. Usually one plus one equals two but in Genesis 2:24, two become one. Marriage unites two individuals who come together to share the same residence,

finances, and other resources. Sometimes marrieds even share the same name. Essentially, husband and wife become a unit. They belong to each other exclusively, not from the perspective of ownership or possession, but as a new couple identifying as “we” instead of “I.”

Part of the mystery of oneness in marriage is that it is unique to every couple. Research about successful marriages reveals that there are a myriad ways in which a couple can express their oneness and have a happy and satisfying marriage that glorifies God and respects the sanctity of marriage. To be sure, every couple has to strive towards finding ways to enjoy their marriage. They must earnestly look for ways to maintain joy in being together.

The notion of oneness goes beyond physical oneness, although physical oneness is a very important aspect of oneness. Oneness is a merging of mind, body, and soul. It is a deep sharing and giving of self that emerges when there is a safe climate to share thoughts, desires, goals, pains, and hurts. Oneness does not mean that one person loses their identity. In true oneness both individuals feel heard and understood as they bring their individuality to the marriage. At the same time, oneness does mean that there will be a compromise of autonomy as the two individuals learn how to accommodate their similarities and differences and form a new couple identity—the “we” or the “us.” Oneness in marriage means you are no longer single—we stress again that “I” becomes “we.”

Monogamy

The Bible clearly and uniquely endorses marriage sealed with monogamous exclusivity. At Creation, only one Eve was created. The repeated refrain “two shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4, 5) stressed the union of one husband with one wife. This was God's ideal plan for marriage.

Marriage as an exclusive monogamous relationship is often used as an analogy of the relationship between God and humans, which is a reflection of the unity of the Trinity.

“Following the pattern of relationships in the Godhead (John 17:24), meaningful existence for human beings needed to have a social dimension. . . The ideal expressed in Creation was for man and woman to form a whole in which they were to be mutually complementary and interdependent.”³

It is within the confines of this monogamous exclusivity that the deepest and most intimate of human relationships becomes strengthened and sealed.

Permanence

In Matthew 19:6 Jesus states, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” This statement clearly indicates that marriage is to be a relationship that lasts forever, and it is common for most couples to recite this acknowledgment in their vows, “until death do us part.” When the marital relationship is built on a solid foundation of lasting commitment and permanence, there is stability in the relationship.

Without this total commitment it would be difficult to achieve true oneness because the relationship would not be a safe place to explore and reveal one’s true self. It would be difficult to be vulnerable in the relationship. Commitment conveys to each spouse that the relationship is a safe place to share their needy side and feel that the other person will stand by them and not take advantage of them. Even when the inevitable offenses come, each spouse can still trust that the relationship is sturdy enough and can be healed.

Sacredness

When God performed the first wedding He “blessed them” (Genesis 1:28). This first couple had God’s approval for enjoying all the rights and privileges of marriage. And this is true for all marriages that have come afterwards who follow God’s original divine plan for marriage. The marriage blessing of Adam and Eve was brief. However, there are elements of the first marriage blessing that are later found in Old Testament and New Testament weddings. The marriage ceremony was a public event where

family, friends, and community were called together to witness and ratify the setting apart and blessing of a newly married couple. The wedding ceremony is not just a cultural or social event but puts on public display a couple who is making a covenant before God and other witnesses. Marriage is sacred and holy and should always reflect God’s glory.

At the wedding each spouse promises to give his/her self to the other. This giving of self should not be understood as right of ownership but as stewards of God’s property. Marriage should not be slavery. Any guise of this type of ownership in marriage is a manipulation of God’s original intent and is a sin.⁴

COUPLE OR GROUP DISCUSSION

- By couples or in groups of 4-5, read Genesis 2:18-25.
- Discuss the essential elements found in this passage and Part 1 of this seminar. (*Notes for Facilitator*: Marriage as a part of Creation, leaving parents and cleaving to wife, two becoming one flesh (emotionally, spiritually, and physically), monogamy, and permanence/commitment, sacredness).
- Discuss how this Christian view of marriage is similar or different from how weddings and marriage are seen today in society and the church today.
- Discuss strategies for maintaining a biblical worldview of marriage despite competing worldviews.

PART 2

How to Prevent Marital Distress and Divorce⁵

In part 1 of this seminar we mentioned that research reveals there are, essentially, a million ways in which couples can have a happy and satisfying marriage. On the other hand, research tells us there are distinct patterns that create barriers to oneness in marriage and lead to future distress and divorce. In addition to these negative patterns, many couples today

water down their marriage vows to protect themselves should things not work out as planned. It seems that some couples are setting lower expectations just in case they are not able to live up to the level of permanence or commitment required for a lasting marriage.

So how does a couple build a marriage that will last a lifetime, one that is not only stable but satisfying? Is it possible to prevent distress and divorce? The good news is that couples can stay happily married for a lifetime, minimize distress in their marriage, and prevent divorce. However, couples who aspire to staying married for a lifetime have to be deliberate about and committed to removing destructive patterns and increasing positive behaviors in their marriage.

Eliminate Negative Patterns

Let's get the negative things out of the way first, then we will give a few positive things you can do to keep your marriage stable and happy. We begin with the negative because if couples can remove just one negative pattern to begin, they will immediately experience positive growth in their marital relationship. The happiness dividend is almost instant.

Negative patterns of communication are the most destructive to every marriage. We get married to enjoy companionship and friendship, so when communication becomes burdened with bitterness, contempt, putting each other down, and other hurtful forms of communicating—or lack of communication—one spouse or both get tired and frustrated with the marriage. This reality destroys the marital bubble of safety and trust in which both spouses are confident that the other is there protect their feelings.

Couples who recognize they are reacting rather than being proactive in regular daily interactions will begin to see changes in the way they relate to each other. Instead of responding immediately to something you don't like or resorting to harsh words; spouses must learn to pause and take a deep breath; to think about what they should or shouldn't say, and consider what impact certain responses will have on the

relationship. Spouses should ask: "Is what I'm about to say going to enhance our oneness and glorify God or will it just add fuel to the fire and make the situation worse?" Most relationships⁶ need only one person willing to be a hero for the relationship to work. No doubt, it is even better when spouses take turns being the hero—the person willing to humble him/herself and taking the initiative to deescalate tension—as necessary.

Another negative pattern that couples struggle with is trying to solve problems that are not really problems. These are the problems that are really just personal idiosyncrasies such as how towels should be folded, or which way to hang the toilet paper, or how to squeeze the toothpaste from the tube. Too often these personal preferences become major causes of contention in marriage because we forget about the "we" and resort to the selfish "I." The truth is, every marriage relationship requires a compromise of autonomy. Couples must learn to make room for each other's differences and accept the fact that neither is perfect. We must learn to put aside sin and selfishness in our relationship and freely give grace to each other.

The last negative pattern we will discuss is dysfunctional attitudes. Couples who think and speak negatively about their relationship will reap the results of a poor marriage. We truly are what we think! Our brain believes what we tell it. So, couples who regularly think negatively about their marriage will have a bleak outlook on their marriage. On the contrary, if the overall outlook of your marriage is positive, even when there are challenges, you will believe there is hope for your marriage.

Commit to Having a Strong and Happy Marriage

Having a successful marriage is possible and highly probable, but only if couples are intentional about doing so. Good marriages require a plan and commitment to do a lot of hard work. Here are a few essential steps any couple can use to get their marriage back on track and stay on a strong foundation.

Build your marriage on real love. The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 what real love is, “Love is patient and kind . . .” When couples practice this type of love, their marriage will reflect God’s glory and His divine intent. Real love requires a genuine regard and respect between spouses, and being willing to practice self-denial for the sake of the relationship. Real love requires sacrifice and a commitment to seeking the best for the marriage or the “we” or “us”.

Become an active listener. Healthy and positive communication begins with active listening. This form of listening involves listening with your ears, your eyes, and your heart. It conveys to your spouse that you really hear and understand what they are saying, even if you don’t always agree. Listening is not problem solving. When each spouse in the marriage feels heard and understood, they draw closer together as a couple. It is much easier to solve problems and resolve conflict when each spouse feels heard and understood. This one small act enhances intimacy, builds trust, cultivates commitment, and strengthens the relationship altogether.

Forgive often. The Oxford Dictionary has these definitions of forgiveness: 1. To stop feeling angry towards (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake. 2. To no longer feel angry or wish to punish. 3. To cancel a debt. In Mark 11:25 Jesus gives a directive, “and whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

If your marriage is going to thrive and flourish, forgiveness must be a regular ingredient in your relationship. Forgiveness serves as the path for healing and reconciliation in every relationship. In every marriage couples will inevitably hurt each other. When you choose to forgive, you give up your perceived right to punish the other person or to retaliate later on. When you fail to forgive, resentment and bitterness grow in the relationship which leads to a negative pattern or destructive cycle. Of course the more severe the infraction, the more difficult

it is to forgive. However, forgiveness frees us so healing can begin. Most marriages suffer from an accumulation of small infractions that have been left unforgiven. Forgiveness preserves the hope in your marriage.

Cherish each other. Another phrase of the marriage vows that is too often and easily forgotten is “to love and to cherish.” We have already spoken about the phrase “to love” but what does it mean “to cherish?” When we cherish something, we care so much for it that we protect it, respect it, are grateful for it, and we hold it dear. To have a happy and healthy marriage we need to cherish each other. We need to treat our spouse as if he or she is our most cherished treasure. We need to be more tender, loving, respectful, and protective of the precious gift that God has given us in our spouse. Marriage is indeed a wonderful gift from God and a reminder of how much He loves and cares for us.

Conclusion

Marriage was created by God, first to help human beings better understand His need to be in relationship with us, then to satisfy the human need for love, intimacy, and stable companionship. Hence, marriage is divinely designed, sacred, and holy. Couples who strive to have sacred marriages that seek to reflect God’s character will build a marriage that will weather the storms of life. Not only will your marriage survive, but it will thrive and experience a “little heaven on earth”⁷ as you enjoy married life.

COUPLE OR GROUP DISCUSSION

- By couples or in groups of 4-5, identify negative patterns in your own relationship or that you see in relationships on tv, social media, etc. Discuss how these negative patterns contribute to the distress in marriage. What pattern can you remove from your own marriage or other relationship that will help your relationship grow?

- Discuss ways in which couples can cherish each other in public and in private. If you are a couple, share with each other what your spouse can do to make you feel loved and cherished.

Notes

- ¹ Part 1 of this seminar is framed by chapter 11, “The Institution of Marriage” by Miroslav Kis and Ekkerhardt Mueller, from the book: *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects* (E. Mueller & E. B. De Souza Eds. Vol. 1). Silver Spring: Review and Herald.
- ² See family.adventist.org for more on the mission and vision of Family Ministries.
- ³ Aecio E. Cairus, “The Doctrine of Man”, in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, Commentary Reference Series*, vol. 12, ed. Raoul Dederen, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 210 in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects* (E. Mueller & E. B. De Souza Eds. Vol. 1). Silver Spring: Review and Herald.
- ⁴ See p. 254-255, *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects* (E. Mueller & E. B. De Souza Eds. Vol. 1). Silver Spring: Review and Herald.
- ⁵ This section is based on the chapter “How to Prevent Marital Distress and Divorce” from the book, “Hope for Today’s Families”, Willie and Elaine Oliver, 2018, Silver Spring: Review and Herald.
- ⁶ We recognize that some relationships might be struggling with violence and abuse or mental illness. These strategies may help alleviate some of the distress in these situations, however, we strongly recommend that those who find themselves in such situations seek professional help.
- ⁷ Adventist Home, p. 15.4.

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Marriage Counseling

CURTIS A. FOX

Automobiles are complex mechanisms. They require care and attention, servicing, and specific grades of fuel in order to function optimally. Fluids must be checked and not allowed to fall below the desired threshold. Tires need to be rotated regularly, and maintenance appointments kept. The manufacturer's recommendations have to be followed or problems are almost sure to come up. If automobiles require constant care, vigilance, and tune-ups to maximize their longevity, why wouldn't infinitely more complex couple relationships require even more attention to function as the Creator intended?

Before she became my wife, my girlfriend told me of an experience that she had one Friday afternoon. Returning from an errand about 40 minutes from her home, she realized that her car was behaving strangely. Further, she saw the temperature gauge moving swiftly in the wrong direction signaling that the engine was overheating. She knew immediately that it was time for urgent action, so she found the nearest exit and got off the highway in search of someone who might be able check out the problem with as little hassle as possible. She made it off the highway, but the "smoke of her torment" was now visible, rising from the

engine compartment in plumes. To her great dismay, the engine was fried. There was nothing that any auto technician could do at this point. She had sought help too late.

This short article will address the following important points regarding marriage counseling: The value of counseling; attitudes that impact how people experience counseling; how counseling is conducted; and factors that affect the success of a therapeutic relationship between a couple and a marriage counselor.

What is Marriage Counseling?

Marriage counseling refers to the help one or two persons see from a professional therapist when they are unable to manage their present relationship issues in a way that leads to a reasonable and workable solution. Often, the counselor is able to sit with them—usually an hour at a time—for a number of sessions over weeks or months. He or she listens carefully while remaining unbiased, helping the couple to explore the patterns of their interactions, set goals for treatment, and showing how they can take steps toward their goals. If it works right, all the above can happen and the couple can then go on to enjoy a more optimal relationship. Challenges are sure to come in the future, but the couple has hopefully learned better coping strategies during counseling and how to apply the lessons of healthy conflict

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resolution to continue to push for change and positive outcomes on their own.

When we are in a couple relationship, we quickly get into a pattern of functioning that becomes fixed and it is difficult to change that pattern once it is set. The pattern is often functional, but the pattern can be dysfunctional and threatening to the stability and wellbeing of the relationship. With all the emotions involved—the desire to blame or to defend one's sense of self, the inability to relate well to her or his partner, to experience forgiveness for some offense, the loss of interest in her or his partner, or real physical safety issues—often it is difficult to tell where the problem began or why it continues. Before long, it may feel impossible to change the pattern of negative interaction and the couple finds themselves stuck. When they become immobilized, all of their efforts lead to worse outcomes, leaving them dissatisfied, overwhelmed, and hopeless.

Feeling the need to discuss the issues, some people turn to close friends, relatives, former loves, family members, or others to find help. Usually the person they seek out has some emotional connection to one or both persons in the relationship, and because they may not have the training to help people resolve such difficult problems, disaster comes even closer to home because of the close proximity of the person attempting to help. Seeking help from such persons when a relationship is in a severe crisis is rarely a good idea. Good counseling is best done by a person who is not too close to anyone in the couple relationship, is a trained counselor, has established ethical boundaries, and is sought out at the right time before the relationship begins to unravel. Many therapists suggest that marriage counseling is typically pursued six years after the time that help should have been sought.

Why do people delay coming in for counseling until they are near the end of the relationship? Many people like to believe that they can handle their issues without seeking help. Further, a significant number of people grow up with taboos about counseling that prevent them from seeking help from anyone,

much less a professional therapist. They may believe that seeking counseling is a sign of weakness, lack of faith, or simply an admission of a problem. Some erroneously believe that once a person or a couple believes in God, they could not have problems that they themselves could not solve with God. That is a false notion and one that has taken many couples down the road to discouragement, disaster, disruption, and divorce. It makes sense to admit the issue and seek professional help early rather than to play tough and invulnerable, over-spiritualizing the challenge while the problem festers.

How Counseling Works

How does marriage counseling work? When someone or a couple calls to make an appointment with a marriage counselor, the therapist listens to the reason for their seeking help. She or he knows that each person is likely to explain the problem from her/his point of view. The therapist wants to know who is initiating the counseling, observes them when they come in, how they sit, how they talk or do not talk to each other, how they respond to each other, their mood, their eye contact, past and present attempts to solve their problems, who else might be involved in the problem situation, the patterns of their interaction, their willingness to change, and more. All of these behaviors are observed as the counselor talks with them, ask questions, laughs with them, gives assignments, recommends readings, bonding activities, encourages space between them, reworks relationships with children or parents, and keeps them focused on their goals for treatment. It can become tense at times during the session and after leaving, but keeping the goals in mind is crucial.

Changing any behavior or pattern of functioning is never easy. We often reject change or the prospect of change. Many people feel like they want to quit therapy because change feels uncomfortable. It is interesting to note that even though a couple may not like having a problem, they are likely to resist change, and often find reasons for not coming back to therapy to process change in their

relationship. Their excuses range from issues with their schedule, finances, or claiming that the problem is solved or cannot be solved. Some stop going because they dislike the therapist or believe the therapist is taking side of their mate against them. These are some of the typical reasons people manufacture to resist having to change.

Marriage counseling may not always work as desired. The goal of therapy is not always realized for a couple. Some may ask, what are the factors that make for successful marriage counseling? These are important to note and here they are:

1. **It is necessary to have a good fit between the couple and the therapist.** For some people, issues such as age, race, ethnicity, life experience, socioeconomic status, therapeutic approach, religious or spiritual values, appreciation for human diversity, and other factors may influence the “goodness-of-fit” between clients and therapist. Therapy works best when the client is comfortable with the therapist and believes that she or he will deliver the best quality of care. Human biases are an unfortunate reality of human life. They exist. On the other hand, there can be issues that the therapist has as well. For the therapist, it is not ethical to begin or to continue treatment if biases are standing in the way of their providing quality care. In that case, a therapist is advised to consult about their issue with a professional peer, a professional therapist, work through the issue that he or she has with the client, or to refer the case, if necessary, to another therapist who may be able to provide more optimal care.
2. **Another factor that can affect the outcome of therapy is any distraction that keeps a client from being present, attentive, and motivated for therapy.** What does this mean? If a person comes to therapy but really does not want to be there or is not motivated, they are likely to be listless, defensive, dismissive, and unwilling to try anything that may be suggested as an attempt to help. There
3. **The inability to forgive one’s partner or to receive forgiveness from her or him after a failure or shortcoming usually leads to a stuck position and it is almost impossible to move forward or experience improvement in that relationship unless forgiveness is applied.** There are some who go to therapy, even different therapists, but who fail to experience growth because they are simply stuck due to some unresolved failure of the past. Until they can release a person from some failure or accept forgiveness for what was done, they will live under a cloud that will impact the weather or the climate of their relationship. Yes, we often pray, “Forgive us of our debts, as we forgive also our debtors” (Matthew 6:12), but that prayer is often prayed long before an offense happens in the relationship. Many people find it impossible to grant forgiveness when they are personally affected by some action of their mate. How we experience and internalize God’s grace—or fail to do so—can have a tremendous positive or negative impact on the outcome of therapy. Thank God that His love and grace shine into, and then out of, our hearts. In experiencing His love toward us, we can give the same to another. So, God’s grace applied in a couple’s life can impact the outcome of marriage counseling. The truth is, many people fail in their ability to integrate grace in their personal lives and relationships.

4. **I have found that the loss of hope is a significant factor that determines the outcome of therapy.** Some just give up on their relationship. They think that it no longer makes sense to go on. They feel that they have tried all and nothing has worked, and therefore nothing else will. Some lose the perspective on time. They want things to work out immediately and forget that they have a lifetime together to work out their issues. That leads to their impatience and discouragement. Some want a perfect relationship but do not have one so they give up. Many people give up their relationship when they cannot see a future beyond their present disappointment and pain. A therapist would do well to ensure that the sessions are not spent just ruminating on the negative and unrelenting situations of the couple's life. Rather, she or he would guide them to look beyond their present experience to hope beyond their present horizon. If or when hope revives, a favorable outcome is more possible for them.

5. **It must be noted that a professional therapist is one who has the training, experience, and skills to understand couple and family dynamics and apply them to therapy and in the lives of the couple.** Counseling is both a science and an art. When a marriage counselor can connect with two persons, remain centered, and help them through their present issue,

the experience can be a most beautiful one. I have met many people that have remarked about the blessings that marriage counseling was for them. They recognized their need for help and support, took the leap, fought against the prevailing taboos, made the sacrifice, applied themselves to the experience, and learned a lot of skills to manage or solve many of the situations that they confront in life from time to time. Now they know that in life real people can have real problems and that other real people can help them overcome their problems. Now they know that God uses some professionals as His instruments of healing in crucial times in their lives, and that in some therapeutic environments, God's works out His will in our lives.

Marriage is a wonderful blessing and nurturing the one with whom one is blessed is a great decision. Sometimes it is easy but not always. If the wheels are spinning in mud, desperate attempts may lead one to overrev and become more stuck. Some help from outside of the relationship may be just what is needed. You can make that call or encourage another to do it when that is what is needed. Recognizing that need for help or support as early as possible is the best course of action and may help a couple have fuller and richer experiences for the duration of their marriage.



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REACHING FAMILIES FOR JESUS

STRENGTHENING DISCIPLES

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Centennial Edition

Intimacy Training: Steps to Deepen the Level of Intimacy in Your Marriage

GÁBOR MIHALEC

Do you know the Rubik's Cube? I must admit that I have a very conflicted relationship with this toy. On one hand I admire it because it is a very smart and creative toy. (By the way it is a Hungarian invention. Ernő Rubik is a Hungarian architect, who invented this toy in 1974.) On the other hand I am really angry about this little invention, because I could never solve it. No matter how hard I tried, I could not get all the colors to match on each side. I have a cousin who is living proof that it is possible to solve the Rubik's Cube. She can do it in less than 30 seconds.

The same thing is true for marriage. There are people who tried it and found that it didn't work, at least not for them. They came to the conclusion to throw the cube away because it seems impossible to solve. On the other side there are people who are the living evidence that it is possible to live happily and faithfully for decades—with the same spouse.

These people know what the Bible means when it says: "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love" (Proverbs 5:18-19).

After listening to nearly 100 different stories about infidelity, after looking in the eyes of those

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who have experienced it in their marriages—both men and women—I discovered that there is a pattern. There are different stages that most couples go through who end up in infidelity. It is a phenomena that is explainable and even predictable. And if something is explainable and predictable, that means it is also preventable. Here are some practical steps that can help you to deepen your level of intimacy, thereby preventing infidelity from even becoming a consideration in the mind of either spouse.

1. Define your relationship

Who are you to each other? What are your expectations of each other?

A couple in their fifties sits in the therapist's office. Their surnames are different, and when they introduce themselves they do not specify the nature of their relationship. As they talk, it becomes clear that they love each other, but in some respects they act as if they are not committed to each other, while at other times they talk as if their relationship functions according to well-defined rules. After listening to them for a while, the therapist asks, "Can you tell me who you are to each other?"

The question unsettles the couple. Suddenly they become tense, look at each other, and then they look at the therapist again. The wife nods at her husband, encouraging him to speak first.

The man, obviously embarrassed, searches for the right words to say before suddenly blurting out a perfect answer: "We are actually living in an undefined relationship."

At every stage of the marriage relationship it is good to define who you are to each other and what you can expect from each other. If you are dating, you can say: "We consider ourselves a dating couple and our goal is to get to know each other more in order to decide how to continue our relationship."

If you are engaged you might say: "We are an engaged couple who have made a decision that we want to continue life together, even if we cannot fully implement our decision at this point in time."

If you are married then say: "We are a married couple, and we have committed ourselves to a long-term, monogamous relationship where we open up all areas of our lives to each other; we will show trust and loyalty to each other and continuously work together on a shared life journey." Marriage can be described in many ways. I like the following definition: "Marriage is the voluntary, monogamous, life-sharing union of one man and one woman, based on equality, mutual love and commitment, protected by law, and made with the intention of lifelong commitment."

EXERCISE

Discuss as a couple how the different elements of the marriage definition describe your relationship.

2. Mark and protect the boundaries of your relationship

In a marriage two individuals create a new form of life, a new companionship—a WE, if you will. Everything that belongs inside the boundaries of We that we take out to somebody who is not part of the We can be considered infidelity.

It is useful to know where we are at different stages of the relationship, what we can expect from our mates. When we start looking for mates

our radars are calibrated to view a wide spectrum. We recognize everybody who could be of interest to us and we are likely to consider several potential partners. After narrowing the field, we start to concentrate on a single person. If we decide to consider a long-term relationship and we both develop the intention to get to know each other on a deeper level, then we put the others aside and start to focus on each other.

This does not mean that we delete the memory of others, but it does mean that we will not initiate contact, simply because there is now someone in whom we have started to invest our time. This is critical, because if we maintain several relationships parallel to each other then we reduce the chances of getting to know one person on a deeper level. This stage requires that we treat the other person as if she or he will ultimately be the only special person in our lives with whom we will be romantically involved. Otherwise, he or she will never become the only one.

Then, as we become more and more convinced that we want to share the rest of our lives with the person we are coming to love, we then make an explicit move—we must make our intentions public. In a traditional setting this move is called engagement. This is not a finite decision, but it is a public declaration of intentions. In we say to the world, "We are serious about our relationship and we want this relationship to move towards mutual commitment and exclusivity." If the time spent together before this moment did not give enough assurance that the person is the one with who you want to spend the rest of your life with, then you should move on and reactivate all the names you still have stored in your memory. Of course, it might happen that someone not on your list might enter the picture. Anyway, the process restarts, and if there is mutual interest and a growing commitment, all others are put aside again and there is a mutual, exclusive focus to know each other better. When we find the person we would like to be with, we are faced with a very definite decision. A joint journey starts, one that we want to walk together and only with each other. This is called marriage. Once we arrive at this stage, we delete other possible partners for good from our memory. Leaving the search phase behind, we now step into the "I've found it" phase.

The tragic reality is that there are many married men and women whose radars are still calibrated on a wide spectrum. In their behavior they are more seekers than finders.

What does border protection mean? Let me share with you what it means for me as a pastor and therapist?

- I intentionally avoid being alone with a woman in the building. If there is someone else around, their presence injects restraint into the situation and also gives my client a sense of security.

- I avoid situations where I would need to travel alone with a woman in my car.

- When I meet or greet a woman I avoid physical contact, and will not hug or kiss even if I see that she intends to. I stretch out my hand and offer a handshake from an appropriate distance. This way I regulate the spatial relationship. Naturally, if there is an older woman, with whom I have a kind of mother/son or grandmother/grandson relationship, then I do not mind having them get physically closer. It is the same with women who are close friends with both Dora and me.

- Avoiding physical contact is also important in situations where I have to comfort someone. When I console a man it is natural that at the appropriate moment I place my hand on his shoulders. However, when I am in the same situation with a woman I will avoid touching her at all. I will rely solely on verbal communication to express comfort.

- It is also important for me to make it clear to everyone that I live in a happy marriage with Dora. In my local church we hold hands and express our love for each other in appropriate ways. This transmits the message, more than anything else, that there is no place for a third person in our relationship.

EXERCISE

What does border protection mean in your life, in your profession?

3. Let's make it 100%

Which accomplishments in your life make you most proud? Your career? Your studies? Something in sports? Did that success come without some amount of effort and discipline? No! You needed to make decisions, take actions, put all your efforts in order to achieve it.

Do you know any bank where you can deposit \$60 and withdraw \$100? So why do you think that this would work with your marriage? In order to achieve good results in your marriage, you need to work on it intentionally. You need to learn about the dynamics of marriage; you need to know your spouse; you need to talk to them regularly and spend time together frequently.

In my own research I was able to prove that within a short period of 6 months the marital satisfaction of couples who don't work on their relationship drops by up to 13%. Imagine what happens in 10, 15, or 20 years. On the other hand marital satisfaction can increase by up to 7% in 6 months if the couple works on their marriage by taking part in marriage retreats, reading good books, making time for each other. Imagine what might happen if they kept this up for 10, 15, or 20 years!

My message here is this: You cannot halfheartedly approach something you expect to be one of the most important aspects of your life. You can't kick a goal from the bench. You need to be on the field, to take the risk to be injured, you need to sweat, to cooperate. You need to kick the ball in a way so that all the energy in your whole body is concentrated on the square centimeter that touches the ball. You can't be a spectator in your own life, and certainly not in your marriage!

The magic word to focus on in this stage of marriage is intention! For a long time I was convinced that this was something obvious, something that everybody understood, but I came to realize that this is not the case. I was invited to lecture, and in the invitation letter I was asked to provide a few sentences that the organizers could use in their advertisement. In those sentences I used the word intentional twice. However, I was very surprised when the organizer sent back the text for revision because I thought that it was

well worded. The message stated that I should rewrite the advertisement and that I should avoid the word intentional. Her explanation was that the word affected her very negatively in an advertisement about emotional relationships, because it referred strongly to the mind and the will. I had to admit that she was right to some extent. We are encouraged not to think in order to make us good consumers. It sounds scary if someone encourages the opposite: for us to use logic, careful decision-making and consciousness, even in relationships. However, we cannot get the best out of our marriage unless we are intentional.

EXERCISE

What are the things you can intentionally invest in for the growth of your relationship? List at least 10 ideas.

4. Foster the atmosphere of trust in your marriage

It always makes my heart beat faster when I read the creation story. There we find the perfect description of trust: "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25). They were naked and felt no shame. They had nothing to hide, in both the literal and figurative sense. They lived together with the greatest openness and trust that people can ever experience. This idyll now seems far away and unreachable, even if everybody desires to experience the same state of soul and body. Yet we are afraid to drop our defenses and look into the eyes of our partners, and to open up to each other and make ourselves transparent and vulnerable.

What do we need in order to learn to trust someone? According to trust experts, there are several factors that build up trust: competence (an experiential conviction that the person knows what they are doing and is able to get things done); consistency (the person has repeatedly, and over a long period, proved their trustworthiness and predictability); care (the person has empathy and acts in the interest of others, and we can rest assured that they are on our side); honesty (being sincere and open, the person is able to discuss both negative and positive issues without being

unkind, and is able to consider the pros and cons, the person will say and do whatever they really think and feel). Trust is not a constant entity within us that either exists or doesn't exist. It is dynamic and will change constantly in the relationship. Therefore, we have to work intentionally to develop it, and it is possible to make it grow.

Cultivate a culture of respect and admiration. The more positive things we say about our partner; the more intentionally we search for things we can be proud of in them; the more lovely characteristics we find, the more we will be drawn to them. This will also make us more attentive, and we will see things that are important for our spouse.

Don't live together with "scrappy" things. It is hard to trust someone in a relationship who harbors unresolved issues. These are the issues that create that feeling of "OK! OK! But . . . there's another side to that!" If we have caused any grievances in the past then we should deal with them. Let go of the past, forgive, and ask for forgiveness.

Resolve the conflicts that can be resolved. This is very similar to the previous point. The difference is that these are not only shadows from the past that influence our relationship, but conflicts that feed on the present situation. Conflicts cannot be avoided, but they must be resolved with the prospect of coming closer in the relationship. Active resolve conflicts.

Develop a glass pocket and glass heart. If we trust someone we have nothing to hide. Hiding finances is not an option. Lies cannot be part of the relationship, even if they are "only" withholding information. They will undermine trust, and how can we trust someone in whom we are unwilling to confide the truth? Would it bother you if you were to receive the same treatment from my spouse? There is no place in a marriage for misinformation. Just as politicians are expected to have glass pockets, married couples are expected to have glass hearts!

Exercise positive fidelity. Howard Clinebell distinguishes between positive and negative faithfulness.¹ Negative faithfulness is motivated

by outside factors and it is based on fear of consequences. Positive faithfulness is motivated by internal factors and is based on mutual love and respect. The person does not cheat on the partner because they love them, and the relationship is of much greater value than a few hours of fleeting excitement.

Do things together just for the sake of being together. If I think about the persons in my life whom I can really trust (thank God there are a few) then I see one thing they all have in common. I have spent a lot of time with them in one or another phase of my life, and our friendship and trust is the natural byproduct of this time spent together. This is true of marriage as well. If we spend a lot of time together then we get to know the person and we get to trust them. Marriage is in need of leisure time spent together—time when we are not together to do something, but only to be together with our friend.

5. Talk! Talk! Talk!

If a couple are to communicate on the deeper levels of their relationship, they have to find a way to communicate intimately. Many speak without giving attention to what the other person is telling them or what the other person needs. Like children playing in the same sandbox, one is pushing his little car, the other is playing with his toy soldiers, and neither of them is paying attention to each other. Jean Piaget, the great Swiss child psychologist, called this phenomenon a “collective monologue.” On many occasions adults, and even intimate partners, conduct such monologues as a poor substitute for real dialogue. An intimate discussion is an entry ticket into the inner world of our partner. A simple conversation that assures our spouse that we are listening, that we are really interested, so much so that we have turned towards him or her with warmth and acceptance can help open up his or her heart.

Noted marriage researcher Dr. John Gottman gives us a four-step guide on how to achieve this.

Step 1. Articulate your feelings

It is very surprising to see how difficult people find it to articulate their feelings:

especially men, who are usually used to arguing and finding solutions. Irrespective of gender differences, we tend to start sentences with “You,” which communicates feelings not directly but indirectly. For example, when the wife says to her husband, “You have once again left the plates on the table!” she actually means, “I feel that my work is considered less important and less valuable compared to yours, and you do not value what I do for our family!” This second sentence is an “I” statement, and it is about the feelings that the person is experiencing. If we were to communicate this way in our everyday conversations we would experience the benefits, even if it may sound a bit artificial at first. The first step is to understand what our feelings are and then share them with our spouse.

Step 2. Ask open-ended questions

Much is dependent on the use of questions in a conversation, so a good conversation partner will know how to ask questions. They will know the difference between yes/no questions and open-ended questions and how to use them the right way. It is easy to distinguish between the two types of questions if you think of the answer. A yes/no question can be answered with a very short answer, usually a yes or no. Open-ended questions require a longer answer with more explanation. Both have advantages and disadvantages, which need to be considered when you choose your questions. Open-ended questions tend to calm the situation, and make the conversation deeper and more interesting with longer answers. The disadvantage is that in some situations they will produce long, shallow clichés.

For example, if the question is “How was your day?” the husband might feel too tired to talk about all of his day and may answer, “Nothing interesting!” So the question requiring a shorter answer would have been more useful if it was, “How was the mood in the office?” Yes/no questions have the advantage that they elicit exact answers with specific information. The disadvantage is that if there are too many of them they will make the conversation boring with lots of pauses. And that might make one feel like he or she is being interrogated.

Step 3. Deepen your partner's expressions

We can do a lot to make conversation deeper if we reflect the words of our partner. Your partner will feel that you are paying attention to what he or she is saying, and this will help them open up even more, thereby sharing more emotions. Here is an example:

Wife: "Today I looked at our wedding pictures again. How young and how much in love we were!"

Husband: "So, you had some nostalgic moments about that time when our lives had fewer responsibilities and we had more time for each other?"

Step 4. Express your sympathy

The conversation may come to an end if one party does not pay attention or show sympathy, but rejects the speaker or offers solutions. In an intimate conversation the point is not to solve the speaker's problem, but to make them feel how important they are, and that we take them and their emotions seriously. The person does not need to be afraid of anything because there will be no rejection. A lot depends on the kind of short comments we make in these situations. We can use very brief comments to enhance the conversation, or we can shut the person up completely, putting them on the defensive. Once people feel they need to defend themselves, that signals the end of intimacy. The following will help to keep a conversation flowing and make it deeper:

- I can see that this is really hurting you
- It hurts me too to hear what you are saying
- No wonder you became angry
- If someone said this to me, I would be hurt too
- Oh, my dear, this must have been really bad for you
- This situation would have tried my patience as well
- I believe I know what you mean. Did you want to say something like this...?

Conclusion

We went through five important steps that helps to deepen the level of your intimacy in marriage and make marriage affair-proof. How about if we end this seminar with a loyalty resolution? If you agree, would you please read the following sentences aloud with me?

"I am married, which means that I have narrowed my perception of intimacy to accept only the signals and responses of one person. I want to be a good spouse for that person, and that person only. I have intentionally chosen her/him and don't want to spend the rest of my life looking for closeness and intimacy in the company of others. I have no desire or intention to squander the gift of my sexuality on anyone else. I will resolutely protect our relationship against all intruders, taking special care to guard its boundaries in all circumstances. I will take responsibility for my words and actions. I will avoid ambiguous language that may encourage flirtation of any kind, and will make it clear to all that I love my spouse, and that I am not available for a relationship with anyone else.

"I intend to use every possible tool, and all the sound advice that is available, to improve our relationship and help our marriage achieve its fullest potential. To this end, I will consider every penny and every minute spent on improving our marriage to be a prime investment in the most important venture of my life."

Book Recommendation

You can find more steps with lots of practical information and exercises on this topic in Gabor Mihalec's latest book: *No More Games: How to build a faithful and satisfying relationship* (Autumn House, 2018)

Notes

¹ Howard J. Clinebell, *Growth Counseling for Marriage Enrichment*, p. 23.

² John Gottman and Nan Silver, *What Makes Love Last?* pp. 93-99.

³ Michele Weiner Davis, *The Sex-Starved Marriage*, p. 187.

The Beauty of Marriage

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Bible opens and closes with marriage.¹ Genesis presents marriage as the first institution established by God at creation while the last chapters of Revelation use marriage as a metaphor to portray the relationship between Christ and His people. Significantly, marriage is uniquely positioned at the end of the creation week to underscore God's ideal for the human race.² After six days of calling into existence that which made earth a livable place, God punctuates His creative genius by forming Adam from the dust of the ground and Eve, from a rib of Adam's side, as a complement and partner for life. To be sure, marriage is the foundational human relationship God gifted humanity with as the locus for developing and keeping a meaningful connection with Him.³

The Beauty of Marriage

On August 26, 2014 we celebrated thirty years of marriage. *Celebrated* is an accurate and suitable description for the emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual pursuits we have engaged in with each other for three decades. Similar to most marriages, our marriage has not been all fun and games. We have endured our share of trials and challenges. However, in life every challenge presents an

opportunity for growth, and in marriage it is a call to deeper knowing and understanding of each other. As such, our lives together have been an extraordinary and satisfying experience we would do all over again if presented with the opportunity to do so. Our marriage has been a place where we have found the most emotional support, connection, and safety.

When we stood before the minister on our wedding day—on a bright and sunny Sunday afternoon at the Village Church in South Lancaster, Massachusetts—repeating vows to stay together “till death do us part,” we had no idea how difficult it would be to keep those vows. The words were easy to say, especially in the midst of a cascade of emotions, camera lights flashing, and the beaming faces of family and friends. At the same time, nothing we had experienced before could have prepared us for the amazingly rewarding life we have shared since as husband and wife.

Perhaps the best example of this almost contradiction is sailing. For our thirtieth anniversary, we escaped from our daily cares for a Caribbean getaway. As our vacation began, we decided to take advantage of the free sailing lesson offered at our hotel. Other than a brief, unpleasant experience of sailing at summer camp that I (Elaine) had, our favorite sailing ventures involved watching the sailboats gliding effortlessly across the Chesapeake Bay in Annapolis or in other seaports we've visited.

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However, as soon as our lesson began, we realized there was much more to sailing than what appeared on the surface.

It was at once both stressful and relaxing, challenging and rewarding. We quickly realized we would need to work as a team and be on the same side of the catamaran, if we were to experience the joy of gliding smoothly across the beautiful turquoise Caribbean waters. We learned the most important phrase in our sailing lesson: Turn toward the wind. In sailing, it is very important to know the direction of the wind. Knowing where the wind is blowing is critical because in order to depower the sails one has to turn toward the wind. At first, this instruction seemed counterproductive to our need to slow down the boat and turn it in another direction. For those who understand aerodynamics, it probably makes a lot of sense! And indeed, turning toward the wind worked every single time we needed to slow down and turn in another direction.

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Inevitably, storms will arise in marriage—some small, others large—but when they do, together, as a couple, we can and must choose to turn toward the wind if we are going to experience longevity and true joy. Turning toward the wind is like turning toward God when we are facing various challenges, and allowing Him to calm our fears and push us back on course.

In marriage, we have the opportunity to reflect God's image and glory as we relate to each other every day. Marriage requires sacrifice and commitment, much like our relationship with God. Without the struggles, nevertheless, couples will never experience the full splendor and beauty of marriage God intended in Eden and still wants us to have. It would be like saying we have faith in God but never having our faith tested or giving faith an opportunity to grow as a muscle that gets strengthened only when given the chance to be exerted.

Too many people today enter marriage with an individualistic notion of personal fulfillment rather than focusing on relationship fulfillment. While in healthy marriages couples need to

strike a balance between both, there must be a sustained and intentional consciousness of otherness as a part of our daily reality. There is no other way to survive and thrive in such a close and intimate relationship such as marriage, without adopting a perspective that includes the feelings and opinions of others, at the very least the feelings and opinions of the person we have chosen as our spouse. Perhaps looking at marriage as if one were a part of conjoined twins helps to illuminate this perspective. In some cases they share a heart, head, leg, and other vital organs. While each one has a distinct personality and identity, there has to be a negotiation and accommodation of the other to be able to survive and thrive each day.

We strongly urge couples to participate in a rigorous premarital education program with a qualified facilitator. In fact, we recommend doing this prior to an engagement because doing so afterwards makes it difficult to benefit from the process as wedding plans are established. Most couples are reticent to make changes once a wedding date is set. Premarital education or counseling allows people to gain a viewpoint that goes beyond personal needs and enter into the world of the other person; couples also learn skills that will enhance their future marriage. It is like taking driver's education before taking a driving test to become a licensed automobile operator; people planning to be married should do themselves and their future mate a favor by committing to pre-marital education in order to be better acquainted with the complex process of being united to another human being in holy matrimony.

For those who have married without the benefit of premarital education and couples in general, participating in a marriage enrichment retreat annually will boost their marital relationship. Marriage enrichment is like taking your car to a mechanic for service at regular intervals, rather than waiting until your car breaks down to get it to a mechanic. Wanting a car that is reliable and in good running shape when we need to get to work or to run errands is no different than wanting a marriage that

works at an optimum. For the real beauty of marriage to be experienced on a regular basis, married couples must be intentional about connecting with their spouse each day through the power of God, which is the only medium that can provide peace (John 14:27) and the assurance of success (Phil 4:13).

The declarations of God and Adam when God created Eve and united the couple illustrate the deep closeness marriage was intended to be. In Genesis 2:23 we sense the ethos and emotion in Adam's voice: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man" (Gen 2:23). And in the following verse God makes abundantly clear what will transpire in the process of a man and a woman becoming married: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

God created marriage. As such, God implanted in each of us a deep desire for intimacy, first with Him, then with another human being (Gen 2:18). This form of intimacy transcends physical closeness, as many often think when defining its reality. Contemporary studies on the human condition concur that one of the greatest needs of human beings is knowing another deeply and being known deeply. As we see it, the only relationship that has that level of trust is found in marriage. Intimacy in marriage is deepened when we remain faithful to commitments made—beginning with our wedding vows—and requires significant compromises and sacrifices. It breeds a familiarity that is so profound; it requires consistent integration of our emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and our physical selves.

In our experience, there is no way to remain true and faithful in a spiritually directed venture like marriage, without relying on the power and grace of the same God who brought us together and joined us in holy matrimony for life. We decided from the very beginning of our marriage that divorce will not be an option for us. Because marriage is so incredibly challenging

and difficult, considering divorce as a viable option would lead almost every couple to take it as a way out of the misery often experienced when we fail to rely on the resources—patience, kindness, grace, forgiveness, power (1 Cor 13:4)—God offers us every day for our health and our good. The Bible is replete with relational directives (Jas 1:19; Rom 12:18; Eph 5:21; Prov 5:18; 1 Pet 3:7) that, if followed, will allow married couples to experience the joy and beauty of marriage and their marriage to serve as a blessing to others.

Even though God's grace and forgiveness are available to those who have gone through divorce (with or without biblical grounds), God makes it clear that He hates divorce (Mal 2:16). While God works with His people because of the hardness of their hearts (Deut 24:1–4; Matt 19:8), divorce had never been a part of His plan from the beginning when He instituted marriage. To be sure, marriage is to be a symbol (Eph 5:24–26) of the enduring love Christ has for the church.

Unfortunately, the permanence of marriage has been trampled on by the prevalent focus today's society places on self and prosperity. Invariably, people entering marriage today are more concerned with what they can get out of marriage rather than what they can contribute to their relationship. With divorce rates at about 50% for first-time marriages, there is a growing cynicism about whether it is possible for a couple to have a marriage that lasts a lifetime.

We declare categorically that marriage is for long-term investors, the kind willing to patiently wait to see growth in their accounts. Experienced long-term investors do not panic when there are sharp declines in the financial indicators; they do not gamble for a quick return. The long-term investor makes wise decisions that will yield strong positive returns over the long haul. When we employ patience and kindness as a consistent strategy in our relationship, we will reap positive returns. Like financial investors who are patient and make sound decisions, commitment and effort in marriage will reap

the benefits of a relationship where there is understanding, empathy, and love.

We can truly say that the return on our investment has far exceeded the expectations we had when we stood at the altar more than three decades ago, and it continues to grow and mature each day through the power and grace of Jesus Christ. We have experienced our share of ups and downs that are normative in every marriage relationship: the joy of celebrating anniversaries; the exhilarating miracle of giving birth to our two children; the pain of experiencing two miscarriages; the frustration of thinking *zig* when the other is thinking *zag*; the pride of watching our children perform at piano and violin recitals and graduate from grade school, academy, and university; the pain of losing a parent or grandparent; the joy of having the other to lean on during these difficult times; challenging work schedules; personal, physical, and emotional changes that are a natural result of the aging process; and the peace that we both believe and trust in the same God. Through it all, we have become *soulmates*—we are truly intimate allies.

Conclusion

On a recent trip to Corinth—a sixty-minute drive from Athens, Greece—we developed a greater understanding of the lifestyle of the ancient Corinthians with all their debauchery, decadence, and sexual immoralities. A principal reason why the Apostle Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians became much clearer to us. Paul wanted to share with the Corinthians—and future students of the New Testament—what true love is all about, in contrast to the detestable pseudo love rampant in the prostitution that took place in the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of the Corinthians.

What we now understand much better—and are still learning every day—is that the love that is needed for a lasting and satisfying marriage is *agapē* love. The unconditional love that Paul so eloquently expresses (1 Cor 13:4–7, MSG) and only God can give.

We like the idiomatic translation found in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

LOVE NEVER GIVES UP,
LOVE CARES MORE FOR OTHERS THAN
FOR SELF,
LOVE DOESN'T WANT WHAT IT DOESN'T
HAVE,
LOVE DOESN'T STRUT,
DOESN'T HAVE A SWELLED HEAD,
DOESN'T FORCE ITSELF ON OTHERS,
ISN'T ALWAYS "ME FIRST,"
DOESN'T FLY OFF THE HANDLE,
DOESN'T KEEP SCORE OF THE SINS OF
OTHERS,
DOESN'T REVEL WHEN OTHERS GROVEL,
TAKES PLEASURE IN THE FLOWERING
OF THE TRUTH,
PUTS UP WITH ANYTHING,
TRUSTS GOD ALWAYS,
ALWAYS LOOKS FOR THE BEST,
NEVER LOOKS BACK,
BUT KEEPS GOING TO THE END.⁴

To be sure, God is love (1 John 4:8). The love that flows from the essence of God is truth, grace, kindness, forgiveness, humility, compassion, understanding, and much more—and it is unconditional. This is the kind of love that God intended when He gave the gift of marriage to the human family.

Let's go back to the beginning: creation. After God created the man and the woman, He gave a critical instruction for sustaining a life-long marriage. "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall hold fast to his wife and they shall be one flesh." (Gen 2:24, ESV). In this instruction, there is first, a directive to leave behind our attachment to parents/family and form a new attachment to our spouse, which then forms a oneness. This new oneness is no longer "I" but "We," and it is so intimately tied, that to separate this union would deeply wound both individual parts.

This is the beauty of marriage: knowing and being known; loving and being loved; being happy when the other is happy; feeling sad when the other is sad; holding hands just because; sharing a tender kiss on the cheek;

getting excited that it could be more; feeling at peace if it is not; waking up tomorrow, and doing it all over again.

May these deliberations reignite in everyone God's original and blessed intent for marriage. Despite the brokenness of sin, which we have all experienced, with God's help we can make of our marriages a little heaven on earth. More than hope so, we pray so.

Maranatha!

Notes

¹ In the words of the Welsh Christian minister Selwyn Hughes, "[t]he Bible opens and closes with a wedding." Quoted in Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire, England: John Hunt, 2000), 659.

² "Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian, a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse and should be entered into only between partners who share a common faith." *Seventh-day Adventists Believe... : A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press), 329.

³ "Instituted by God, marriage is a sacred ordinance and should never be entered upon in a spirit of selfishness. Those who contemplate this step should solemnly and prayerfully consider its importance and seek divine counsel that they may know whether they are pursuing a course in harmony with the will of God." Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 70.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 1 Cor 13:3–7.

Where Is the Love? Even Good Marriages Face Challenges, So It's Best to Give Your Spouse the Benefit of the Doubt

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Q: My husband and I have been married for almost 30 years and we have had, praise God, a pretty good relationship throughout our marriage. Now that we are in our mid-fifties, all of the sudden my husband seems uninterested in being sexually intimate with me. Sometimes an entire month goes by and he seems to be just fine without any action. During our 30's and 40's I could hardly keep up with him. In fact, sometimes his appetite was simply too much for me. Now that our children are mostly gone, and we have the house to ourselves, he is wimping out on me. Is this normal? Is he having an affair? Am I no longer attractive to him? What should I think and what should I do?

A: Married life has a way of being unpredictable. When you finally begin to think you have your spouse all figured out and are ready to ride into the sunset coasting all the way, an unexpected wrinkle appears in your relationship.

What we know about good marriage relationships all over the world is that almost every concern can be solved if you have learned how to communicate well as a couple. While we can try to guess what is going on with your husband, after 30 years of a great marriage,

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you've obviously learned how to talk to each other. This kept the relationship healthy and going strong. So, talk to your husband and ask him the questions you need answered.

Now, we detect some anxiety in you toward your husband. Therefore, we would suggest that you change your self-talk and approach your husband as the friend you have been for all these years. Avoid accusing him of anything sinister or using language that will make him defensive. In fact, choosing the right time to have this conversation is as crucial as the conversation. Perhaps during the weekend when you both have more down time might be the best time.

Approach the conversation in a casual way, as part of your everyday conversation. Express what you have noticed and what you would like to know, rather than indicting him of anything. Also, use "I" messages, rather than "You" messages. This simple technique will help protect your conversation and keep both of you talking without escalating into a big argument.

Here's an example of what you can say to your husband: "Hey baby, I've noticed during the last few months that I haven't had the closeness with you that I've been used to during most of our marriage. From my vantage point I've made myself available to you. However, I feel that there has been no follow-up from

your side. And, behavior from me that in the past would have received a romantic physical response from you, it seems to me these days, goes unanswered. Is there anything you would like to share with me to help me understand what is going on with you? Regardless of what's going on, I want you to know that I am here for you, and want to assure you that I believe we can work out anything together for the good of our marriage."

This kind of non-threatening conversation with your husband should assure him of your unconditional love, and willingness to hear him, and empathize with him. Subsequently, without pressuring him, allow him to take his time and share with you what he believes is going on with him, and how what is happening or not happening is affecting your relationship.

By the way, in your question you mentioned that you and your husband are in your mid-fifties, which makes the question you have posed a very plausible one at this stage of your

marriage. It isn't unusual for sexual activity among married couples of your age to begin to slow down a bit. Of course, this doesn't mean that your sexual life is over. However, as you speak with your husband openly about what you have experienced lately in your marriage, it may also be necessary to involve your primary care physician for help, as well as simply accept that with the aging process you will need to adjust to a new normal.

Despite what we've just shared above, we encourage you to have the non-judgmental conversation with your husband that we mentioned earlier. Despite the fact that the best marriages are never without challenges, it is important to always give your good marriage the benefit of the doubt.

Ask God to help you with the right attitude and words to speak with your husband. After all, He has promised that if you ask, it will be given to you (Matthew 7:7). You and your husband are also in our prayers.

We Disagree on Everything: Manage Your Emotions the SMART Way

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Q. I am 30 years old and have been married for 18 months. We were so in love when we got married that I just knew our marriage was going to be a fairy tale life. Boy was I wrong! The last three months have been a nightmare as my husband and I have been disagreeing on just about everything. We can really use your help with some tips to improve our communication and attitude toward each other. Please help!

A: Thank you for being big enough to acknowledge that your marriage needs a little coaching despite being very in love with your husband. The truth is, most marriages can cause marital distress, and if not dealt with may lead to the ultimate breakdown of your marriage—as many, unfortunately, have experienced—this is a pattern that can be broken and fixed. As long as you and your spouse are willing to pay attention to what’s happening, and understand that you can intentionally choose a different response, your marriage can get back on track, and there is no better time than right now.

A good place to begin is with prayer. Invite your spouse to join you for prayer at the beginning and ending of each day. Find good things about each other you want to

thank God for, and mention these good traits in your prayer. Pray for patience and the capacity to be kind to each other regardless of the circumstances. Pray for your ability to communicate better with each other, and to be intentional about thinking before you speak. Choose a response that will build rather than destroy your marriage.

There are many books we have referenced and shared through this column, and we would like to recommend that you get an read *SMART Love* by Dr. David Stoop and Dr. Jan Stoop.¹ It is a book about improving your emotional intelligence as it relates to your marriage.

The essence of Smart Love is pretty simple and practical, and works if you employ the concepts shared here in your marriage. SMART is actually an acronym:

- S - stands for Self-Awareness
- M - stands for Managing your Emotions.
- A - stands for Accountability.
- R - stands for Reading the Other Person’s Emotions.
- T - stands for living Together in the Land of Emotions.

Most human beings live with little awareness of what it is that makes them tick. Their emotions, values, patterns of behavior in response to certain situations, what’s most important in their lives their dreams, their

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goals, and even their aspirations for the future. The more self-aware we become, the greater our capacity will be to manage our emotions, to live by our values, and to relate to the most important people in our lives with dignity and respect.

The more self-aware you and your husband become, the easier it will be to manage your emotions, to be accountable for your behavior, to read each other's emotional moods, and together live in the land of emotions, which means being constantly mindful of each other's needs. It means living with empathy—the capacity to push yourself to feel what your spouse might be feeling, and to choose a response that acknowledges the needs of those feelings.

We encourage you and your husband to claim God's promises to provide for your marriage what it needs in this moment and believe that God will hear and answer your prayer. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus declares: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." So claim, this promise and trust God for the rest.

You will continue in our prayers. Remember to get the book and read it.

Notes

- ¹ Dr. David Stoop, and Dr. Jan Stoop. 2017. *SMART Love: How Improving Your Emotional Intelligence Will Transform Your Marriage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.



REACHING FAMILIES FOR JESUS

DISCIPLESHIP AND SERVICE

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

What's Love Got to Do with It?

CLAUDIO AND PAMELA CONSUEGRA

The Text

SONG OF SOLOMON 5:16

Do you love chocolate?
Do you love milk?
Do you love ice cream?
Do you love the weather?
Do you love your parents?
Do you love your spouse?
Do you love God?

We use the word *love* for so many different things and in so many different ways that it loses its value. Maybe this is why love may not appear to mean much to most people. What we do know is that when it comes to love and commitment, our culture's message is clear: Nothing lasts forever. Love, at least as presented in films, novels, music, and celebrities' lives is a powerful emotion that ebbs and flows and eventually dries up. The Scriptures take a dramatically different view. In the Song of Solomon, the bride exclaims, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as strong as death*" (Song of Solomon 8:6).

If you are weighing a lifetime commitment to another person, it is this understanding of love you need to consider. But what does it involve?

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From our experience and study of Scripture, we have made some observations about the nature of lasting love.

OBSERVATION 1:

Marriage Requires Friendship

One key to a healthy marriage is friendship rooted in common values and interests. That's not the type of love people today typically look for in romantic relationships. The ancient Greeks can give us insight into this dilemma. The Greeks recognized that there were many forms of love, and they used an array of terms to describe them. Two of their favorite terms were *eros* and *storge*.

Eros is powerful romantic love that flares up quickly and expresses itself in dramatic ways. Erotic lovers experience all the soaring peaks and gut-wrenching plunges of an emotional roller coaster. Erotic lovers are adrenaline junkies who desperately seek new thrills.

On the other hand *storge*, or the love between friends, is slow to develop but lasts. Marriage, perhaps more than any other bond, needs this durable love—a love that lasts. When people are dating it is easy to get caught up in the romance of *eros* love. But in marriage, love and commitment are often expressed through mundane, daily responsibilities and sacrifices that are more associated with friends—*storge* love—than lovers.

Scripture confirms this connection between passionate, romantic love and friendship. The bride in Song of Solomon describes her lover as radiant and compares his body to “polished ivory” (Song of Solomon 5:14). When he touches her, her heart pounds (verse 4). And we could ask ourselves, What stirs such powerful romantic feelings? After sensually describing her husband’s body, she states, “[This] is my lover, my friend,” (v. 16, NLT). Her friendship with Solomon and her romantic feelings for him were inseparable.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the French philosopher and humanist once said, “It’s not a lack of love but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.”¹ A lot of social scientists—sociologists and psychologists—agree.

OBSERVATION 2: Enduring Love is Unselfish

For love to last, it must be unselfish, but today self often comes first. We have often heard spouses in troubled marriages ask, “Don’t I have a right to be happy?” Marriage and relationships are good only if they enrich you. If a relationship takes too much time, attention, or sacrifice, many would advise you to throw it away and move on. It’s not surprising then that many of the couples who attend marriage workshops and retreats struggle with selfishness. I like the apostle Paul’s definition of love. You know where it’s found, right? 1 Corinthians 13 is one place. But here’s another place: “Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends . . . Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand” (Philippians 2:3-4, MSG).

We could simply say that marital love is work. Or as Paul states, love is the daily decision to “put yourself aside” and focus on the needs of another. Think about this, there is no switch you can flip on your wedding day that suddenly allows you to look out for another person’s interests before your own. The ability and desire to be selfless is tested in the daily interaction of dating.

As your dating relationship turns serious and marriage becomes a possibility, it’s time to ask some probing questions: “Am I willing to put this person’s needs above my own, even when it’s inconvenient?”

I recall the time a couple came once to my office. They were both from Mexico—a young couple married just three and half years. He came to the United States to make some money to help her so she would be able to finish her nursing training. While in Mexico, a former boyfriend of hers became obsessed with her and raped her. He threatened her, kidnapped her for a week, and only let her go after she promised to have all charges dropped, which she did after he released her. She told her husband and her parents, with whom she was living, what had happened to her. He asked her to come to the States so they could be together. Understandably, the young wife developed some barriers that prevented her from giving herself completely to her husband as she would have in a normal, healthy marriage relationship. When she could not overcome her emotional and psychological barriers, she told her husband that she was not being fair to him and that they should divorce so he could find himself a good wife. That is how much she valued the well-being of the man she loved.

With tears in his eyes, the husband said to his broken wife, “But I love you. I learned from Jesus’ sacrifice for us that because I truly love you, I am willing to give my life for you. And if I have to wait months or years before we can be intimate again, before we can have a good marriage again, I’m happy to do so, because I love you.” This couple—both husband and wife—exhibited the true meaning of unselfish, other-centered love. Not my needs, but my spouse’s needs come first.

OBSERVATION 3: Premarital Sex Complicates Everything

Avoiding sexual intimacy before marriage is another component of finding lasting love. Besides the fact that it goes against God’s directives, premarital sex clouds judgment. Deciding to marry someone is one of the most important steps

you'll ever take; you need to be able to evaluate the relationship clearly. Yet, sexual intimacy often makes a couple feel closer than they are and hinders their ability to see each other in nonsexual ways. The overshadowing power of sex is one reason Scripture instructs us to reserve it for marriage. The Apostle Paul writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3, NASB).

When God puts something off limits it is because He wants to protect and provide. In this case, God wants to protect us from making clouded decisions about another. What does it mean to abstain from sexual immorality in a dating relationship? While the Greek word Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, *porneias*, covers a broad range of sexual actions, it mainly focuses on intercourse. Paul also adds that we should avoid "lustful passion" (verse 5), or actions that would cause us to desire to have sex.

Because sex and dating are considered synonymous in our culture, pursuing lasting love with someone will require you to ask difficult questions of yourself and your relationship. From the more psychological point of view, there is great value in the privacy and intimacy reserved for marriage. Once that mystery is removed, there is a great loss in the relationship. Sadly, statistics do not lie. Couples that live together before marriage greatly increase their chances of divorce compared to those that do not.

Rabbi Schmuley Boteach writes,

SURRENDERING SEXUALLY TOO EARLY IN A RELATIONSHIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS GUARANTEED TO DESTROY THE BUDDING ROMANCE, CHIEFLY BECAUSE IT UNDERMINES THE SENSE OF MYSTERY. YOUR BODY, COVERED IN CLOTHING, IS A MYSTERIOUS TREASURE WHICH ONLY BONDS OF COMMITMENT CAN REVEAL. WHEN YOU GO AHEAD AND REMOVE IT ALL, YOU ARE A PUZZLE THAT HAS BEEN SOLVED. EROTICISM (FROM THE GREEK EROS) IS LOST FROM THE RELATIONSHIP SINCE THERE ARE NOW NO OBSTACLES WHICH MUST BE OVERCOME IN ORDER FOR PLEASURE TO HAD."²

OBSERVATION 4: Marital Love Requires Commitment

Our culture assumes love will be short-lived, so couples are not expected to commit to each other. That's why more and more couples are choosing cohabitation rather than marriage. Which, by the way, is one of the reasons most cohabiting couples never marry the people with whom they live. And those who do marry have a much greater chance of divorce due to the "no commitment" mentality that follows them right into marriage. Instead, the Bible's picture of mature romantic love, implies lasting commitment: Jesus said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be **united** with his wife" (Matthew 19:5). The word we most often use for united is the word *cleave*. The literal meaning of cleave is to make a covenant. It means to make a public vow of commitment to God and to the person you are marrying.

That is what Ezekiel says God did when He cleaved to us: "Then I passed by you again and saw that you had reached the age for love. I spread my cloak over you and covered your nakedness. I swore a solemn oath to you and **entered into a covenant** with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine" (Ezekiel 16:8, NLT).

The essence of marriage is a covenant! That's why the marriage vows are not really a declaration of a person's feelings for the other but a promise of what they will be and do for the other. Most of you repeated these or similar vows: I, (name), take you (name), to be my (wife/husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.

To love and to cherish is not referring to a feeling. It is not to feel love toward a spouse, or to feel like cherishing one's spouse. Rather, it is a decision of the will. This decision forms a covenant bond that controls one's future actions. The way to control and not be controlled by your past is to forgive; the way to control your future is to make a covenant. Both

love and forgiveness are decisions we must make! When we attach our souls, our very beings, to another we become one with that person spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. For all our clamoring for independence and freedom, most of us want to be stuck with someone we love and who loves us—for life.

If you are considering marriage, the relationship described in Genesis should stop you cold in your tracks. It is asking you to put your security on the line and committing entirely to one person, one person with whom you will face a lifetime of challenges together.

One of the movie blockbusters of 2011 was “The Vow,” based on a book by the same title.³ The book tells the story of Kim and Krickitt who met and fell in love over a long-distance phone call in 1992. They bonded over their Christian faith and were married a very short time later. Just ten weeks into their marriage, the couple survived a terrible car wreck that left Krickitt in a coma with severe head trauma.

When she woke up from the coma, Krickitt experienced amnesia and was essentially married to a stranger, forgetting the last eighteen months of her life. Some people encouraged Kim to divorce Krickitt. “After all, she doesn’t know you,” they told him. But he refused. It was the couple’s religious belief in the unbreakable vow of marriage that kept them together. “You make a promise before God with your wedding vows,” said Krickitt Carpenter, “You have to take that seriously.”

You may think, *Where am I going to find the strength to love one person consistently for life?* The answer lies in the most important observation about romantic love.

OBSERVATION 5: Divine Love is the Key

Our ability to love a person—and enjoy that person’s love in return—is dependent upon our experience of God’s love. The reason becomes apparent when we consider the type of love all of

us hope to receive. When I ask young people to describe the person they want to love for the rest of their lives they respond, “A person who will always care for me, always look out for me, always accept me, always pursue me, always be interested in me.” The love they envision is powerfully described in the Scriptures:

LOVE NEVER GIVES UP. LOVE CARES
MORE FOR OTHERS THAN FOR SELF. LOVE
DOESN'T WANT WHAT IT DOESN'T HAVE.
LOVE DOESN'T STRUT, DOESN'T HAVE A
SWELLED HEAD, DOESN'T FORCE ITSELF
ON OTHERS, ISN'T ALWAYS “ME FIRST,”
DOESN'T FLY OFF THE HANDLE, DOESN'T
KEEP SCORE OF THE SINS OF OTHERS,
DOESN'T REVEL WHEN OTHERS GROVEL,
TAKES PLEASURE IN THE FLOWERING OF
TRUTH, PUTS UP WITH ANYTHING, TRUSTS
GOD ALWAYS, ALWAYS LOOKS FOR THE
BEST, NEVER LOOKS BACK, BUT KEEPS
GOING TO THE END. LOVE NEVER DIES.”
1 CORINTHIANS 13, MSG

This description of love resonates with us because it was inspired by God for people who were made to be receptors of His divine love. Our fascination with and yearning for perfect love has been embedded into our hearts. But if we’re honest, we realize there’s no way we can always love someone as Paul describes. Expecting an imperfect spouse to love us that perfectly is equally unrealistic and invites disappointment and hurt. Only one person can love perfectly—God. Experiencing His unwavering love is the only way human love can be satisfying. Why? Because when we allow ourselves to be loved by a Divine Lover—who does not have mood swings or bad days—our need for transcendent love is fulfilled. We are then free to be content with the love others can offer. And we’re better able to love others in the way God loves us. If the ability to love someone is dependent upon experiencing God’s love, then it’s crucial to assess your walk with God and that of the person you are dating.

Conclusion

Assessing your views of romantic love and realigning them with God’s perspective takes

time and effort. But think about it this way: If you knew you would drive the next car you purchased for the rest of your life, how would that knowledge affect your decision? What precautions would you take to ensure you were buying the right car? Perhaps you would find out how *Consumer Reports* rates it. Maybe you would pop the hood and see if everything is in place. Surely you would take the car for a long test drive. And yet, the most important thing you could do is take it to an expert mechanic who knows how a car is supposed to run. His exhaustive checklist would trump any list you could put together.

Well, ironically, when it comes to marital love, most people are content to create their own checklists. These lists often reflect an amazingly limited perspective: “Do we have fun together?” “Do my friends like him or her?” “Do we like the same church?”

As Christians we have access to the perspective of the Author of love. God is not just a lover, but love itself (1 John 4:8). His opinion, revealed in His Word, can guide us as we move from dating to love, to a lifetime commitment with another. If you are considering marriage, there is no surer path to a relationship that will not only be deeply fulfilling, but will also provide an example to a culture desperate for lasting love.

So, what’s love got to do with it? If you want to have a lasting, successful, happy marriage, you need at least four facets of love:

- You need **storge** love, a love rooted in friendship.
- You need **eros** love, an attraction for each other.
- You need **phileo** love, a brotherly love, as if we had always been together.
- And most importantly, you need **agape** love, God’s unselfish, everlasting, all-encompassing love for us and through us.

Robertson McQuilkin, at the peak of his career, resigned as president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in 1990 to become the full-time caregiver for his wife, Muriel, who had Alzheimer’s.

McQuilkin did this, he said, because Muriel was much happier when he was with her. As Muriel needed more and more of him, he wrestled with who should receive his full-time attention, Muriel or Columbia Bible College.

As McQuilkin explained it,

“WHEN THE TIME CAME, THE DECISION WAS FIRM. IT TOOK NO GREAT CALCULATION. IT WAS A MATTER OF INTEGRITY. HAD I NOT PROMISED, 42 YEARS BEFORE, ‘IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, TILL DEATH DO US PART?’ THIS WAS NO GRIM DUTY TO WHICH I WAS STOICALLY RESIGNED, HOWEVER. IT WAS ONLY FAIR. SHE HAD AFTER ALL CARED FOR ME FOR ALMOST FOUR DECADES WITH MARVELOUS DEVOTION; NOW IT WAS MY TURN. AND SUCH A PARTNER SHE WAS! IF I TOOK CARE OF HER FOR 40 YEARS, I WOULD NEVER BE OUT OF HER DEBT. IT IS ALL MORE THAN KEEPING PROMISES AND BEING FAIR, HOWEVER. AS I WATCH HER BRAVE DESCENT INTO OBLIVION, MURIEL IS THE JOY OF MY LIFE. DAILY I DISCERN NEW MANIFESTATIONS OF THE KIND OF PERSON SHE IS, THE WIFE I ALWAYS LOVED. I ALSO SEE FRESH MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD’S LOVE—THE GOD I LONG TO LOVE MORE FULLY. SHE IS SUCH A DELIGHT TO ME. I DON’T HAVE TO CARE FOR HER, I GET TO.”⁴

Notes

¹ Quoted by Les & Leslie Parrot in *Relevant Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2008;

² Boteach, Schmuley. *Kosher Sex: A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy*. Danvers, MA: Harmony Books, p.172.

³ Krickitt And Kim Carpenter, Couple Who Inspired ‘The Vow,’ Talk About Love That Endures. OWN. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/krickitt-and-kim-carpenter-the-vow_n_5676474.html

⁴ Zylstra, Sarah Eekhoff. Died: Robertson McQuilkin, College President Praised for Alzheimer’s Resignation. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/june/died-robertson-mcquilkin-columbia-president-alzheimers-ciu.html>

Becoming One Flesh: God's Plan for Intimacy in Marriage

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Introduction

“THEREFORE, A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS
FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED
TO HIS WIFE, AND THEY SHALL BECOME
ONE FLESH.”

GENESIS 2:24

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It was during Creation week that a miraculous and extraordinary event occurred. The first man and the first woman were united in holy matrimony, a miracle where two are becoming one. This phenomenon of oneness is so incredible that it is referred to as a “great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32a). As grand and spectacular as today’s weddings are, not one can compare to this event. In a perfect garden, a perfect man and a perfect woman were joined together by a perfect God who had a perfect plan for their lives.

Oneness and intimacy is about knowing and being known; loving and being loved, hurting when the other hurts, rejoicing when the other rejoices. Oneness and intimacy deepen the marital bond, strengthen commitment and develop even deeper levels of intimacy. Spouses who are willing to take this journey to becoming one flesh will experience the fulfillment of God’s original plan for marriage.

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Toward an Understanding of Intimacy

Usually, when we announce that we are going to talk about intimacy in marriage, people automatically assume we will be speaking about sexuality. While sexual oneness is definitely one aspect of intimacy and plays a very important role in marriage, it is only one part of intimacy. The one-flesh experience as instructed by God does not only refer to the physical body but is also used to represent the “deepest harmonious unity that exists between people, which is the unity between husband and wife in all its dimensions, emotional, physical and spiritual.”¹

Webster’s dictionary defines intimacy as a “close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group, the quality of being comfortable, warm, or familiar.” We can say then that intimacy gives us a feeling of closeness, warmth, and security. In marriage, it is an experience of oneness where husband and wife can share their deepest thoughts, feelings, desires, dreams, goals, joys and disappointments in a safe environment.

This oneness is what God intended for marriage, and it is what drives most couples to get married. However, there is no such thing as automatic intimacy. Oneness and intimacy is a journey that every couple must be eager and willing to take. In our text, Genesis 2:24, the phrase “becoming one flesh,” infers that

the first couple was not instantly one flesh, but that they would become one flesh.² Then in verse 2:25, we see Adam and Eve enter into this experience of oneness, “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve opened themselves up to knowing each other in all aspects without fear or the need to cover themselves.

God embedded in each of us the desire to have this type of intimacy, first with Him and then with one another, the ultimate human relationship of intimacy being that of marital intimacy. But this intimacy can only be achieved in an environment of safety and trust. This type of environment allows for the deepest sharing of our innermost selves, the best and the worst, all for the sake of intimate knowing.

Intimacy creates a sense of belonging and closeness and strengthens the marital connection in a profound and endearing way. When spouses share their deepest selves, it is because they want to be known and still accepted in spite of that knowing. They are honest, open and affectionate with each other. Each is cognizant of their weaknesses and are more understanding of the other's weaknesses. There is unconditional love and acceptance of differences with no desire to exert power or control over one another.

Leaving and Cleaving

This critical instruction given by God (Genesis 2:24) is the key to sustaining a life-long marriage.³ Here, God gives a clear directive to leave the childhood attachment to parents/family and form a new attachment to one's spouse, thus beginning the journey to “becoming one flesh”. This new oneness is the formation of a new identity called “We,” and a letting go of the “I”, a relationship that is so intimately tied that a separation would deeply wound each of the individual parts.⁴

The leaving does not imply that one should abandon one's family of origin. However, contemporary psychologists and marriage and family experts agree that a healthy differentiation

from one's family of origin is essential to a stable, satisfying marriage and intimate marriage. Loyalty to the new couple formation must take precedence over loyalty to family of origin. However, each person brings to the union the best (and worst) from both family systems and forms a new system of their own.

Leaving is essential if cleaving is to take place—in essence, cleaving is another critical step towards intimacy. Many people, including single adults and premarital couples, look to marriage to give happiness, affection, and love. They associate love with the feelings that come with receiving these elements. The truth is that marriage is not about what we can get but what we are willing to give. When each partner gives love, affection and an attitude of joy to the other person, this provides a fertile ground for intimacy to thrive and grow.

Our contemporary culture has misled many into believing that love is a feeling and that soulmates are found. To be sure, love is not a feeling; it is a decision. And soulmates are not found; people become soulmates, which is what intimacy is when couples are willing to make an effort to growing together. Ellen G. White shares in the *Adventist Home*, p. 105.

“HOWEVER CAREFULLY AND WISELY MARRIAGE MAY HAVE BEEN ENTERED INTO, FEW COUPLES ARE COMPLETELY UNITED WHEN THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY IS PERFORMED. THE REAL UNION OF THE TWO IN WEDLOCK IS THE WORK OF THE AFTERYEARS.”

Intimacy is God's plan; it is not illusive. Intimacy is possible and highly probable for every couple who seeks an intimate marriage. Intimacy can be regained even when a couple believes they have lost it. Every couple is vulnerable to growing apart if they are not intentional about growing together.

Dimensions of Intimacy

Many marriage and family scholars have written extensively on intimacy and its

dimensions or categories. These dimensions of intimacy are not mutually exclusive of each other. Intimacy is multi-dimensional, and when couples nurture each dimension, they work together to create the deepest level of intimacy that couples can experience. We will briefly discuss four dimensions of intimacy: emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual.

Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy is when a couple can talk openly and freely about their feelings and desires. It is the sharing of personal values and beliefs; there is also warmth and affection. Too often, after the wedding and honeymoon, couples lose the motivation to stay emotionally close. They allow the daily activities and other competing commitments to consume their lives and schedules, leaving no time for each other. Marriage and family often appear to be postponable because there are presumably other activities that demand immediate attention.

Intellectual Intimacy

Intellectual intimacy is the sharing of thoughts and ideas. Marriage does not ensure that couples will always agree with each other; on the contrary, some people may disagree on most things. However, intellectual intimacy implies that a couple can rise above their disagreements for the preservation of their relationship. Couples can deepen their intellectual intimacy by listening to each other with dignity and respect and encouraging one another. Intellectual intimacy, or any kind of intimacy, cannot thrive in an environment of ridiculing, contradicting, and putting down one another.

Physical Intimacy

Physical intimacy or sexual intimacy is the beautiful gift that God gave to married couples. It is clear from scripture that God intended for sexual oneness to be a part of the complete picture of intimacy. Sexual intimacy thrives best when unconditional love is present; *“love is*

patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5, ESV). Sexual intimacy is inextricably tied to emotional intimacy. While most men have sexual intimacy as a primary need, most women have emotional intimacy as a primary need. If both emotional and sexual intimacy are nurtured, couples will experience mutual satisfaction in their relationship.

Spiritual Intimacy

Spiritual intimacy is not a dimension as much as it is a foundation for all the other intimacies. Spiritual intimacy is the sharing of spiritual beliefs, values, and experiences. It is a strong commitment of faith when couples submit themselves individually and as a couple to God. Spouses get to know each other and be known when they can share their spiritual journeys with one another.

Spiritual intimacy completes the picture of “two becoming one.” Couples who share their spiritual highs and lows form a closer bond and stay more in tune with each other. Spiritual intimacy helps the couple motivate each other to grow deeper spiritually. Even in times of crisis, couples who pray together are better able to cope and be of comfort to each other. There will also be times when one spouse does the praying because the other spouse is discouraged.

When couples are spiritually intimate, it makes it easier for confession and forgiveness to take place. The journey of marriage is a main path in our journey towards understanding God. We often say that a crisis in marriage is a spiritual crisis. The closer we move towards God, the closer we will be to each other in marriage. And vice versa. The more we isolate ourselves from God, the more isolated we will be in marriage.

Maintaining Oneness and Intimacy

Maintaining oneness and intimacy is the most critical issue in marriage. As with

everything else that God made good, Satan attempts to destroy. In Genesis 2:24, we see a perfect union of two perfect people. A couple committed to becoming one flesh with no barriers between them—no fear, no defensiveness, no sin, no selfishness. In Genesis 3, after the Fall, this idyllic situation changes dramatically, and now there is enmity between the first couple. They cover themselves up, blaming, and bickering ensues, and both refuse to be held accountable to God and to each other for what they had done. They became distant from one another, and they became distant from God.

This reality will be every couple's natural trajectory unless they intentionally strive towards maintaining oneness and intimacy. Sin affects our marriages. The post-modern culture we live in affects our marriages. Both are based on individualistic premises and being a servant to one's own desires. This is the opposite of marriage and marital intimacy and the notion of "two becoming one." Couples must be mutually invested in improving the quality of their marriage and moving their relationship towards the deepest levels of intimacy.

Ellen G. White offers in the *Adventist Home*, p. 106.

"THOUGH DIFFICULTIES, PERPLEXITIES, AND DISCOURAGEMENTS MAY ARISE, LET NEITHER HUSBAND NOR WIFE HARBOR THE THOUGHT THAT THEIR UNION IS A MISTAKE OR A DISAPPOINTMENT. DETERMINE TO BE ALL THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE TO EACH OTHER. CONTINUE THE EARLY ATTENTIONS. IN EVERY WAY, ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER IN FIGHTING THE BATTLES OF LIFE. STUDY TO ADVANCE THE HAPPINESS OF EACH OTHER. LET THERE BE MUTUAL LOVE, MUTUAL FORBEARANCE, THEN MARRIAGE, INSTEAD OF BEING THE END OF LOVE, WILL BE AS IT WERE THE VERY BEGINNING OF LOVE. THE WARMTH OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP, THE LOVE THAT BINDS HEART TO HEART, IS A FORETASTE OF THE JOYS OF HEAVEN."

Marriage researchers suggest that the following relational elements should be present for couples to maintain intimacy:

Trust. Knowing and being known is a risky venture. While it sounds like a wonderful notion, it is not that easy to achieve. There are often many factors that keep spouses from sharing intimately with each other. It is scary to be transparent emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually when one is not sure one's sharing will be handled with care. When the environment is filled with conditional love, shaming, and controlling, it becomes easy for people to cover themselves up. Each person must make every effort to create an environment where trust and mutual respect is nurtured.

Attention. Couples must be willing to listen to each other not just with their ears, but with their eyes and their hearts. They must learn to respond to each other's sharing with acceptance, affection, understanding, and sensitivity. It also means being willing to hear how each can make adjustments in their own relational and communication styles that can enhance the quality of the marriage. Being responsive also means having the willingness to deal with hurts, bitterness, and resentment and push towards a process of forgiving and healing.⁵

Availability. Couples must be available to each other in all dimensions of intimacy. While it is not always possible to be 100% in all dimensions, when couples are open to listening and empathizing with each other, listening to each other's joys and pains, they are forming an essential foundation of friendship and companionship. Being available means being dedicated to the relationship, investing in it because you are interested in seeing it grow and develop into a strong marital partnership. It is about becoming intimate allies.

Conclusion

Nurturing oneness and intimacy brings rich rewards to married couples. When couples

choose to nurture and maintain oneness, they inoculate their relationship from the natural affliction of growing apart. It is impossible to grow apart if you are intentionally trying to grow together. And with God on your side, you cannot fail. This is God's plan—that married couples become a revelation of His immeasurable and unfailing love as two become one.

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- ¹ Davidson, Richard M. (2007), "*Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*", p. 47.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ³ Oliver, W. and Oliver, E., "An Introduction: The Beauty of Marriage" in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, p. 9-10.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10
- ⁵ This workshop is geared towards couples who are in relatively healthy relationships where there is a basic assumption that no abuse of any type or infidelity is currently present. Individuals who are experiencing such trauma in their relationship are strongly encouraged to seek help from a professional Christian counselor or their pastor..

Pastoral marriages: A contemporary challenge

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

We have been married and in ministry for 32 years. Staying married to each other and still in ministry after all this time has everything to do with the providence and grace of God. God's grace, to be sure, does its best work when we accept the gift He offers and allow this gift to germinate and grow in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit, whose promptings we choose to follow.

Let's face it, marriage is difficult. Yes, we know marriage to be fun and all those wonderful things we often speak about. Nevertheless, despite our best intentions, the reality of differences that invariably loom large in most marriages keeps us on our knees. The truth is, this kind of reality we find based on a decision bathed in prayer and on being intentional about giving honor and glory to God in our marriage.

The pastoral marriage

Pastoral marriages face many of the same challenges as other marriages, and most busy professional couples replicate similar competing commitments experienced by many pastoral couples. The principal difference comes when pastoral couples have the added pressure of

living in a fishbowl and with high expectations from their parishioners and employers to be all things to all people. This includes the role of spiritual champions in every situation—especially in the way they disciple their children to be true followers of Jesus Christ. In addition to the ever-present challenge of not having enough time to accomplish all that lies on their plates, pastoral couples often deal with short tenures and frequent moves, which take them away from close connections with family and friends, thus upsetting their emotional equilibrium.

This experience is often compounded by financial constraints, since we are in a world where living on one salary has gotten increasingly difficult. Especially in the developed world, the pastor's spouse is often left having to find a new job, which may include many weeks and months with an interruption in wages, adding anxiety, tension, and trauma to an already stressful situation. It is in times like these that pastoral couples, like all Christian married couples, need to recognize that marriage is God's idea and was created for our good. "Instituted by God, marriage is a sacred ordinance and should never be entered upon in a spirit of selfishness. Those who contemplate this step should solemnly and prayerfully consider its importance and seek divine counsel that they may know whether they are pursuing a course in harmony with the will of God."¹

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While marriage was designed by God to bless the human family, Satan has tried everything to denigrate, depreciate, and defame this important institution. As such, expect your marriage to naturally move toward a state of alienation. The Bible says in Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”² This simply reminds us that there are no perfect marriages because there are no perfect people. However, since God is more powerful than Satan, every marriage can thrive when the partners are intentional about connecting with each other every day through the power and grace of God.

A quote from an unknown author we often like to share says, “Getting married is easy. Staying married is more difficult.” Staying happily married for a lifetime would be considered among the fine arts. This is true of every marriage and especially true of pastoral marriages that experience so many expectations from within and without.

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To be sure, expectations surge from within because of the need to represent Jesus well. The concept may often be seen as the need to pretend to have a perfect marriage when you do not. Of course, the more pastoral couples feel compelled to present to the public an image that is not real, the less likely they are to accomplish that goal because of the stress generated internally, given the reality of our human frailties. The pressure from without comes from others, often church members, and sometimes from our families, friends, colleagues, and employing organizations, which tend to hold pastors and their families to a higher standard than they do *regular* human beings. In order to transcend these insufferable burdens, pastoral couples must spend a lot of time in prayer, seeking a genuine relationship with God and with each other.

Speaking about the need to stay in prayer, Romans 12:12 offers: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Yet Isaiah 65:24 declares: “ ‘Before they call I will answer; / while they are yet speaking I will hear.’ ”

And Ellen White reminds us in her little book *Steps to Christ*: “There is no chapter in our

experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. ‘He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.’ Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son.”³

Digital harassment

On the matter of time as a commodity in pastoral marriages, the proverbial tyranny of the clock has never been more real than what we are experiencing today. Email, Facebook, and text messages, along with countless new apps that emerge every day, give ubiquitous access to our time for anyone, everywhere, at any time, creating an expectation for receiving instantaneous responses. Each day has only 24 hours in which pastors must have time alone with God, visit parishioners, study, write sermons, attend organizational meetings, blog, give Bible studies, respond to email, engage social media, sleep, eat, exercise, have family worship, and connect with relatives and friends. After we attend to all of these things, not only is there little energy left for anything else, there is no meaningful time to share with one’s spouse. And if we are really honest with each other, there is actually very little time to spend with God in prayer, which means we end up with very little fuel to have the wherewithal for an effective ministry and real satisfaction in one’s life.

Boundaries

So how does a pastoral couple create more time in the context of living in the third millennium in order to have the quality of relationship that makes life really worth living? The truth is, for this to happen, healthy boundaries must be established in order to

survive and thrive. And healthy boundaries are found in the context of emotionally intelligent people, who have a high level of self awareness, knowing what they want to accomplish in the process. On this matter, Daniel Goleman suggests: “Self-awareness is the first component of emotional intelligence. . . . Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. . . .

“Self-awareness extends to a person’s understanding of his or her values and goals. Someone who is highly self-aware knows where he is headed and why. . . . The decisions of self-aware people mesh with their values.”⁴

The self-awareness and emotional intelligence we speak about here does not just come because we have more education or are smarter than anyone else. It comes because of an intimate relationship with God and our desire to honor Him in our most intimate relationship with our spouse. This becomes the kind of emotional intelligence that brings peace.

On the issue of prioritizing and making the most of time, Stephen Covey suggests that “one of the worst feelings in the world is when you realize that the ‘first things’ in your life—including your family—are getting pushed into second or third place, or even further down the list. And it becomes even worse when you realize what’s happening as a result.”⁵

The truth remains that we cannot add hours to our day, but we can add order and priority to those hours so that we are able to maximize the time we have with our spouse each day, each week, each month, and each year to have the kind of relationship that will stand the test of time and give honor and glory to God. In order for things to change, if this has not been the priority of our lives, we will need to develop a new and improved framework to live by.

To be sure, we will need to shift the paradigm of our lives. This means we will need to see things differently and to do things differently in order to get a different result. In contrast to other relationships, which are constantly

changing, marriage is meant to be permanent, and understanding that the responsibilities in marriage are not postponable will help us to *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) so that we can make our marriage a high priority *each day*. This means scheduling meaningful time to spend with each other *each day*.

Moving from one place to another in the course of ministry becomes a reality that cannot be easily altered and is seen as the nature of the proverbial beast of ministry. I (Willie), as a pastor’s son, moved several times during my childhood and as a missionary’s child lived in at least three countries before I got to my teens. As a couple, we have lived in four different states in the United States, in eight different homes, and have had eight to ten different ministry assignments in three decades.

Each move has been challenging, though some were more traumatic than others. But in every move we have experienced the hand of God and blessings we would never want to do without. As the apostle Paul declares in Philippians 4:11 “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

The money factor

Of course, when it comes to money, we can always do with more. And, while pastors in certain parts of the world enjoy a middle-class or even upper-middle-class lifestyle—especially if their spouses have good professional jobs—in other areas of the world pastors suffer with meager resources and salaries, and their spouses do not get paid to work. And yet, the same God that we worship we must learn to trust in if our lives in ministry are going to be a blessing to others. We must follow our Master’s example of self-denial.

Financial stability, to be sure, depends as much on our philosophy of stewardship as it does on our habits of consumption. As mortals entrusted with the privilege of handling God’s Word to inspire and lead people to Him who is life eternal, we, too, must believe that God

keeps His promises. As pastoral couples, we must claim the promises God made in the past to His people, which are still good for His disciples today. The message of Malachi 3:10 is still operative, which declares: “ ‘Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.’ ” God promises no lack of blessings if we are faithful to Him. In Matthew 28:20b, Jesus promises: “ ‘And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ ” In John 14:27 Jesus promises, “ ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.’ ” And last but not least, in Philippians 4:19 the promise is, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

Conclusion

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As we take another look at the reality of pastoral marriages, we must do so mindful of the fact that sometimes it is more difficult than it needs to be, because we approach this highly spiritual work without the corresponding spiritual values that must be present for it to work. As we stated, “Too many people today enter marriage with an individualistic notion of personal fulfillment rather than focusing on relationship fulfillment. While in healthy marriages couples need to strike a balance between both, there must be a sustained and intentional consciousness of otherness as a part of our daily reality. There is no other way to survive and thrive in such a close and intimate relationship such as marriage, without adopting a perspective that includes the feelings and opinions of others, at the very least the feelings and opinions of the person we have chosen as our spouse.”⁶

As you commit to nurturing your pastoral marriage today and in the weeks, months, and years ahead, we encourage you to remember Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

May your relationship with God grant you the patience and kindness needed to give honor and glory to God through your marital relationship. More than hope so, we pray so.

Notes

- ¹ Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2001), 70.
- ² All Bible references are from the English Standard Version.
- ³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), 100.
- ⁴ Daniel Goleman, *What Makes a Leader: Why Emotional Intelligence Matters* (Florence, MA: More Than Sound, 2013), 10, 11.
- ⁵ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* (New York: Golden Books, 1997), 113.
- ⁶ Willie and Elaine Oliver, “The Beauty of Marriage” in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 6.



2017
PLANBOOK



REACHING FAMILIES FOR JESUS

GROWING DISCIPLES

— WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER —

Building Your Marriage on the Rock

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Text

THEREFORE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS
FATHER AND HIS MOTHER AND HOLD
FAST TO HIS WIFE, AND THEY SHALL
BECOME ONE FLESH
GENESIS 2:24

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NOTE:

Use sermon by Olivers in this planbook "Rock or Sand builders" as a useful reference for this seminar

States and in many countries of the world, 40 to 50 percent of first time marriages will eventually end in divorce.¹ What happens to the vows of staying together "until death do us part"? Is it that those making the vows didn't take them seriously? Or is there a lack of true understanding of what the vows really mean. In addition, it seems that as couples hear about the high failure rate of marriage, they are watering down their marriage vows. Some vows now say, "as long as we both shall love" instead of "shall live". It would appear that some couples are setting their expectations lower just in case they are not able to live up to such a high level of commitment.

Introduction

Weddings are beautiful, delightful and blissful occasions. When a couple stands at the altar, holding hands, gazing into each other's eyes, reciting their vows, they have so much promise and so much hope. Every couple believes their love is so special and their bond so strong, they will remain together "in sickness and in health".

The reality is that most couples will end up on one of three paths: couples who stick, couples who are mostly stuck, or couples who simply stop (S. Stanley, 1998). In the United

With this daunting reality, how does a couple stay married for a lifetime, and happily so? How does a couple in today's society build a marriage that is rock solid and not one that washes away with the sand?

The Science of Love and Relationships

Most of us have heard about or have experienced first-hand *falling in love*. At least that's what it is called in contemporary society. That giddy, butterflies in the stomach, rush of feelings we get when we meet someone we are powerfully attracted to. The truth is that this is not really love it's just the body's natural response to the neurochemicals that are being

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pumped into the brain when we meet someone that we find attractive. We prefer to call it “*falling in like*” or infatuation. Another truth is that this response is not sustainable with the same person unless we are intentional about connecting positively on a daily basis. The powerful force that connects us at the beginning begins to wear off once we stop all doing all the wonderful things we did at the beginning of the relationship and we have to negotiate the daily cares of life. Because we are wired (by God) to intimately connect with another human being, when the romantic feelings dissolve, we believe we have fallen *out of love*.

In the article “*The Power of Love*,” Sue Johnson (Johnson, 2016) states that new science is revealing how essential romantic love is to human beings. Sociologists and psychologists are also finding how this love works, why it goes wrong, and what couples can do to make it last longer. Their findings reveal that from ancient times, humans have had the need to connect with someone and this need provides trust, safety and security. Its opposite is isolation, which is coded in our brains as dangerous. Furthermore, these findings on love reveal that a life partner is often our only or most reliable source of support, comfort, and intimacy. In this age of growing isolation and loneliness, even scientists agree that now more than ever, people need to be in “forever” committed relationships and evidence suggests that it is possible to sustain the romantic bonds for a lifetime.

God and Marriage

At the end of creation week, after God had finished creating the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the sea, the animals, the man, He looked at everything and “behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:30). According to the Genesis account, everything was perfect—all but one thing—the man, Adam, was alone. Thus God declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). Earlier, we said that new advances in social science have revealed that loneliness and isolation are dangerous and

detrimental for our well-being. To be sure, it takes science a while to catch up with God, and it is very gratifying when it happens.

God created human beings to be in relationship with Him first and then with others. When He created Adam, and then Eve, He knew that humankind would need the kind of relationship where trust, safety, openness, and closeness could thrive. This is the definition of intimacy or the oneness that God talks about in Genesis 2:24, 25, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” God also knew that this high level of intimacy would require a deep vulnerability that would be quite risky without a covenant, so he instituted marriage. Marriage provides the safety of a covenant, a mutually binding agreement that is not found in other replicas of this institution, including cohabitation and consensual partnerships.

Sadly, in Genesis 3, we see the effect of Adam and Eve’s sin on marriage and family relationships. The beautiful admiration, mutuality, and oneness of the first couple gave way to defensiveness, blame, hostility, separation and selfishness. However, God himself provided restoration, hope and healing for humankind through His son Jesus Christ, including restoring His original design for marriage. In the book, *The Adventist Home*, Ellen G. White says this:

LIKE EVERY OTHER ONE OF GOD’S GOOD GIFTS ENTRUSTED TO THE KEEPING OF HUMANITY, MARRIAGE HAS BEEN PERVERTED BY SIN; BUT IT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL TO RESTORE ITS PURITY AND BEAUTY...THE GRACE OF CHRIST AND THIS ALONE, CAN MAKE THIS INSTITUTION WHAT GOD DESIGNED IT SHOULD BE—AN AGENT FOR THE BLESSING AND UPLIFTING OF HUMANITY
WHITE, *ADVENTIST HOME*, 100.1, 2.

The feeling of *falling in love* is a beautiful thing. But relationships are dynamic and they are

always changing. Thus, in spite of how deep this love seems, is it is based solely on a feeling and an extremely shallow level of commitment that will eventually fade or dissipate. However, with much effort, time, commitment and willingness to keep going, it is possible to grow and sustain (or reignite) a love that can be satisfying and stable for a lifetime.

Covenant Commitment in Contemporary Times

As we study scripture, the bible consistently points us to a creator God who longingly pursues His children with an everlasting love (Isaiah 54:5). In the Old Testament God invites the children of Israel to be His people and covenants with them to be their God. This covenant love is a love that endures, renews, forgives, and restores (2 Chronicles 7:14). In the New Testament God speaks about His relationship with His people as a marriage—thus elevating marriage as a symbol of the union of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). This is the biblical model for Christian marriage and family relationships. If we are going to do marriage and relationships the way God intended, then we must have a Christian worldview. We must understand and follow the ways of God.

In marriage, spouses have the capacity to mirror God's covenant love to one another. Commitment that lasts a lifetime requires this type of covenant love. We can love our spouse unconditionally because we experience unconditional love from God (1 John 4:9, 10). In the book, *A Model for Marriage*, Jack O. Balswick and Balswick (2006) posit that covenant love goes beyond loyalty to marriage as an institution and surpasses the need for self-fulfillment. Covenant love is a "*promise to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship*". It is a commitment to care for the needs of each other, nurturing the relationship, and upholding the institution of marriage.

Covenant love and commitment requires an interdependence that goes against the individuality of our postmodern times. It also requires an egalitarian or mutuality that

challenges traditional notions of marriage which resulted in legalistic and inflexible relationships. It is a lifelong commitment to investing in the marriage and holding on to the investment in good and bad times.² When couples are intentional about spending quality time together doing joint activities, they learn to depend on each other, and this deepens their level of commitment.

Rock and Sand Marriage Builders

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus shares the parable of the man who built his house on solid rock and the man who built his house on the sand.

THESE WORDS I SPEAK TO YOU ARE NOT INCIDENTAL ADDITIONS TO YOUR LIFE, HOMEOWNER IMPROVEMENTS TO YOUR STANDARD OF LIVING. THEY ARE FOUNDATIONAL WORDS, WORDS TO BUILD A LIFE ON. IF YOU WORK THESE WORDS INTO YOUR LIFE, YOU ARE LIKE A SMART CARPENTER WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON SOLID ROCK. RAIN POURED DOWN, THE RIVER FLOODED, A TORNADO HIT—BUT NOTHING MOVED THAT HOUSE. IT WAS FIXED TO THE ROCK. BUT IF YOU USE MY WORDS IN BIBLE STUDIES AND DON'T WORK THEM INTO YOUR LIFE, YOU ARE LIKE A STUPID CARPENTER WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON THE SANDY BEACH. WHEN A STORM ROLLED IN AND THE WAVES CAME UP, IT COLLAPSED LIKE A HOUSE OF CARDS.
MATTHEW 7:24-27 MSG

This parable compares the building styles of two men, a wise man that built a house that was able to weather the heavy storms, and a foolish man who built a house that collapsed when the storm rolled in. Jesus then pointed out that those who only read His words but don't practice them in their lives will not be able to weather the storms of life. The analogy to marriage is clear—couples that obey God's word and apply them to their relationship will have a marriage that remains strong when the inevitable storms of life hit. Christian marriage is a marriage built on the Rock—the Rock Jesus Christ.

A marriage built on the sand is based on an immature covenant and conditional love. It is dependent on temporary institutions such as career success, materialism, personal fulfillment, partner performance, and other worldly values. If and when one spouse feels the other spouse or the marriage is no longer meeting their needs, or one loses a job, or there's a financial crisis, the marriage is so badly shaken by these storms that it eventually dissolves.

Building Your Marriage on the Rock

When marriage is built on the Rock it provides a strong foundation for covenant commitment, trust, and intimacy to grow and thrive. This kind of marriage is based on a mature covenant and unconditional love and is fully possible through the power of Jesus Christ (Phillipians 4:13). God gives us His strength to remain faithful to our commitment in marriage and He provides guidance through His word to build a rock solid marriage. We offer below, five essential building steps for your marriage.

1) Build your marriage on covenant love

LOVE IS PATIENT AND KIND; LOVE DOES NOT ENVY OR BOAST; IT IS NOT ARROGANT OR RUDE. IT DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY; IT IS NOT IRRITABLE OR RESENTFUL; IT DOES NOT REJOICE AT WRONGDOING, BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH. LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS, BELIEVES ALL THINGS, HOPES ALL THINGS, ENDURES ALL THINGS. LOVE NEVER ENDS. AS FOR PROPHECIES, THEY WILL PASS AWAY; AS FOR TONGUES, THEY WILL CEASE; AS FOR KNOWLEDGE, IT WILL PASS AWAY.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-8 ESV

This is the kind of love that Christ has for us and it is how we are to love each other in marriage. Covenant love is unconditional love, it is agape love; it continues to love even when one feels like giving up. Jack O. Balswick and Balswick (2006) share this:

COVENANT LOVE AND COMMITMENT ARE WHAT GIVE SPOUSES THE ABILITY TO COUNTER THEIR HUMAN IMPULSE TO GIVE UP AT THE FIRST SIGN OF TROUBLE. OUR COVENANT PROMISES THAT WE AS SPOUSES STAY ON EQUAL FOOTING AND PERSISTENTLY WORK OUT DIFFERENCES AND DIFFICULTIES THAT ARISE.

Covenant love requires understanding each other's needs and being willing to sometimes practice self-denial for the sake of the relationship. Covenant love requires much energy and sacrifice but keeps us determined to creating the best marriage possible.

2) Accept each other's faults and imperfections

In marriage we must learn to value one another and accept that not one of us is perfect. We're talking about having a marriage filled with grace. The wonderful thing about grace is that it is underserved, you can't earn it, but love and acceptance is given anyway. All of us have received grace from God, and it is through His power that we can offer grace to our spouse (Jack O. Balswick & Balswick, 2014). When there is grace in the marriage, it creates an atmosphere that goes beyond guilt and shame, and sets the stage for growth and renewed commitment in the relationship

IN THIS IS LOVE, NOT THAT WE HAVE LOVED GOD, BUT THAT HE LOVED US AND SENT HIS SON TO BE THE PROPITIATION FOR OUR SINS. BELOVED, IF GOD SO LOVED US, WE ALSO OUGHT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER
1 JOHN 4:9,10, ESV

LET EACH GIVE LOVE RATHER THAN EXACT IT. CULTIVATE THAT WHICH IS NOBLEST IN YOURSELVES, AND BE QUICK TO RECOGNIZE THE GOOD QUALITIES IN EACH OTHER. THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF BEING APPRECIATED IS A WONDERFUL STIMULUS AND SATISFACTION
WHITE, ADVENTIST HOME, 107.3

3) Listen, Listen, Listen to each other

Good communication in any relationship is like water and sunshine is to a healthy lawn. Good listening is like the fertilizer that will go deep beneath the surface to nourish and enrich the soil. In most relationships when there's a complaint it is because some needs are not being met—voices are not being heard. Couples who communicate well understand that active listening is an essential ingredient in their marriage.

Active listening means listening not only with your ears, but listening with your eyes and with your heart. It is the kind of listening that conveys to your spouse that you are more interested in hearing what they have to say than defending yourself and stating your point. In the book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, Dr. Stephen Covey says, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". Once again we see self-denial, another essential ingredient for marriage to last for a lifetime.

LET EVERY PERSON BE QUICK TO HEAR,
SLOW TO SPEAK, SLOW TO ANGER.
JAMES 1:19

When each person in the marriage feels heard and understood, the couple draws closer to each other, intimacy increases and commitment to one another and the relationship is strengthened

4) Forgive often

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) has this definition of forgiveness: 1) to stop feeling angry towards (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake; 2) no longer feel angry or wish to punish; 3) to cancel a debt.

Forgiveness paves the way for healing and reconciliation in every relationship.³ In marriage, both individuals will inevitably hurt one another. When we forgive we give up our perceived right to punish or retaliate for the wrong that has been done to us. When we fail to forgive, bitterness and resentment increases in the relationship. Forgiveness

releases us from these feelings. Forgiveness in essence is for the forgiver more than for the forgiven (Smedes, 1984).

BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER AND,
IF ONE HAS A COMPLAINT AGAINST
ANOTHER, FORGIVING EACH OTHER; AS
THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU, SO YOU
ALSO MUST FORGIVE.
COLOSSIANS 3:13

It is only through God's power that we have the capacity to forgive.

Forgiving is a choice. When we choose to forgive, we honor God. Choosing not to forgive reinforces barriers between husband and wife, and it also builds barriers between us and God (S. M. Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 2013).

CHRIST WAS TREATED AS WE DESERVE
THAT WE MIGHT BE TREATED AS HE
DESERVES. HE WAS CONDEMNED FOR
OUR SINS IN WHICH HE HAD NO SHARE,
THAT WE MIGHT BE JUSTIFIED BY HIS
RIGHTEOUSNESS, IN WHICH WE HAD
NO SHARE. HE SUFFERED THE DEATH
WHICH WAS OURS, THAT WE MIGHT
RECEIVE THE LIFE WHICH WAS HIS.
"WITH HIS STRIPES WE ARE HEALED.
WHITE, THE DESIRE OF AGES, 25.2

5) Hug more

Most couples can hardly wait to get married to enjoy the physical benefits of marriage. But as daily life takes over and the giddiness wears off, as we said earlier, we forget to do the things we did at first. Hugging is an easy way to reconnect daily. When we hug or touch each other, the hormone oxytocin is released. Oxytocin is the hormone that increases our bond to another person; it also lowers blood pressure and reduces stress. So there are many benefits we can glean from a simple hug. We encourage couples to hug for a minute every morning before parting from each other, and every evening when they are reunited.

COME MY BELOVED, LET US GO OUT
INTO THE FIELDS AND LODGE IN THE
VILLAGES...THERE IT WILL GIVE YOU
MY LOVE.

SONG OF SOLOMON, 7:11,12B

DETERMINE TO BE ALL THAT IS POSSIBLE
TO BE TO EACH OTHER. CONTINUE
THE EARLY ATTENTIONS. IN EVERY WAY
ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER IN FIGHTING
THE BATTLES OF LIFE...LET THERE BE
MUTUAL LOVE, MUTUAL FORBEARANCE.
THEN MARRIAGE, INSTEAD OF BEING
THE END OF LOVE, WILL BE AS IT WERE
THE VERY BEGINNING OF LOVE.
WHITE, ADVENTIST HOME, 106.2

If couples integrate these building steps into their marriage, they will build a marriage on the Rock and fortify it to weather the storms of life. They will also experience the joy and satisfaction that God plans for every Christian couple. Ultimately God intends for us to be drawn closer to him; He wants to make us holy. Far beyond our own joy and personal happiness, Christian marriage is for us to glorify God and be representatives of His grace and love here on earth.

I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH HIM
WHO STRENGTHENS ME.
PHILLIPPIANS 4:13

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Notes

- ¹ Divorcestatistics.org, and Eurostats.org
- ² This statement refers to people who are in relatively healthy relationships. It is not referring to people who are in abusive relationships or dealing with infidelity. Those who are experiencing such trauma in their relationship should consult with their pastor or a qualified Christian counselor.
- ³ We again reiterate that this seminar is for people who are in relatively healthy relationships. It is not referring to people who are in abusive relationships or dealing with infidelity. Those who are experiencing such trauma in their relationship should consult with their pastor or a qualified Christian counselor

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By His Side

GORDON CHRISTO

Scripture informs us that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). With that in mind we may ponder the purpose God might have had for creating Adam and Eve the way he did. For when it came to the creation of birds, fish, and land animals, the record leads us to assume that males and females were created together, because the narrator states: *“But for Adam no suitable helper was found”*. (Genesis 1:20. Emphasis supplied). All the creatures apparently had mates at that point except the human. The author intentionally draws our attention to this exception but makes no attempt to provide a reason for it.

Plurality in Singularity

At the very outset God had declared his intention to create humans in God’s image. The pronouns used for God are seemingly contradictory. God said “let us make man in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26. Emphasis supplied), using plural pronouns “us”, and “our”. Then the narrator continues “So God proceeded to make man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Genesis 1:27. Emphasis supplied) employing singular pronouns for God “he”, and “him”. The explanation for this

is the Trinitarian concept of God which is, that God is plural and at the same time God is singular. Since God is one, it follows that each of the three members in the Godhead individually are less than one because all three are required to make the “One”. Perhaps it was to replicate that oneness of God that he decided the best way to create humans in his image was to create them first as one, then to divide them, and finally to charge them to cleave together again as one.

Though the Hebrew noun adam refers to the first human created and may be translated as “Adam”, or “man”, we are cautioned that:

... IT (ADAM) SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM 'ISH (MAN, AS OPPOSITE OF WOMAN, OR MAN DISTINGUISHED IN HIS MANLINESS) . . . (IT) ALSO REFERS TO GENERIC MAN AS THE IMAGE OF GOD. . . HENCE IN GEN 1-3 IT IS THE WORD USUALLY USED FOR MAN. (IN LATER PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE IT IS DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH IN MEANING FROM 'ISH.)
L J COPPES, THEOLOGICAL WORDBOOK OF THE OLD TESTAMENT VOL I, P 10
ADAM

The Hebrew 'ishah (woman) is the counterpart of 'ish (man) and not of adam which in the creation account may refer to the totality of male and female. The first time the word 'ish is used for Adam is after the creation of Eve. When Adam

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beheld her, he said, “she shall be called woman (’ishah) because she was taken out of man (’ish). For this reason a man (’ish) will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife (’ishah), and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 1:23, 24.)

That Adam refers to the totality of man and woman in the creation story can be discerned from the text: “When God created man (Adam), he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them man” (Adam). (Genesis 5:1 NIV). One can additionally note here the usage of both singular and plural pronouns (him, them) for man (Adam) just as for God earlier in the passage (Genesis 1:26, 27).

More than a Rib

God removed a "tsela" from Adam to fashion the woman. The Hebrew word "tsela" is used more than forty times in the Old Testament and nowhere else is "tsela" translated, nor does it ever mean, “rib”. There is another word in the Bible which always means “rib”, and never anything else. But the inspired author did not select that word. "Tsela" simply means “side”, especially when there is a corresponding opposite side. It has been used to denote one side of the ark, and also one side of the golden altar, which had two rings, and of the corresponding opposite sides which also had two rings (Exodus 25:12; 30:4). It is used to describe one side of a hill on which Shimei walked, cursing David as he went along the road; –and we may take for granted that that there was a corresponding side on the other side of the hill (2 Samuel 16:13). The "tsela" of Solomon's temple were rooms on the sides of the inner sanctuary (I Kings 6:5).

The incontrovertible word for rib is used in Daniel 7:5 referring to the three ribs that were in the mouth of the bear. Though this passage is in Aramaic, the word 'Ileen is common to Semetic languages and would surely have been available to the author of Genesis. Instead the author uses the word "tsela" suggesting that God possibly removed more than merely a rib from Adam to create Eve. He could have removed a whole side.

Adam himself declared that Eve was “bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh” (Genesis 2:23).

An Equal Counterpart

Two Hebrew words are used to describe the role God designated for Eve. Neged and Ezer. Ezer is usually translated “helper”, but to think of her as an inferior assistant is to grossly misunderstand the term. Ezer occurs 21 times in the Old Testament, always as a stronger helper in time of desperate need. (For example see Psalms 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9-11; 121:2; 124:8; 145:5. Cf Dt 18:5; 33:7,9). It would have been more accurate to translate the word “Ezer” as “Saviour”. The overwhelming majority of references of Ezer are to God. “Eliezer” is representative of such use. It means “My God is helper”. The other word neged most often means opposite, against, or in front of. The translation used in the KJV, “meet for”, should be understood as meaning “suitable for”, but it does not do justice to the concept of opposite. The “help meet for” of the KJV would better be understood as “counterpart” or “mate”. Whereas earlier there was just adam, after Eve was created there is male and female.

What God did to create humans is just as mysterious as understanding the concept of God himself. Paul writes: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). Eve was Adam's counterpart in more ways than just physical. She possessed qualities, attributes, and responsibilities that Adam lacked: to create life, yes, but more importantly, to complement his qualities, attributes and responsibilities, so that together they would reflect the image of God.

This is why male and female are drawn to each other—because they belong together. They juxtapose together. They attract like magnets that have been pulled apart. The opposite chemistries of their minds and bodies draw them closer and closer till they are one. When they do unite, they fulfil the Creator's command to be one.

Ellen White states that God took a rib from Adam. But a careful reading shows that her burden is not to ratify the fact of the extraction of a rib, but to provide the significance for the location which is neither the head, nor the foot, but the side. Her exposition is revealing. She uses phrases such as “corresponding to”, “fitted to be his companion”, “stand by his side”, “as an equal”, and “second self”. She concludes with a reference to Ephesians 5:29 that the one should nourish and cherish the other as his own flesh, for no one hated his own flesh (White, 1890. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 46). In fact translating “tsela” as “side” fits in with her idea much better than “rib”. Her burden was that the two equals should become one.

Becoming One Again

There are several ways in which a couple should be one. The first has just been expressed that they should be one in flesh (Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31). Husband and wife should treat each other as an extension of their own body, much like a Siamese twin. Thus they will not hurt each other physically or verbally because what hurts the other obviously would hurt self. Additionally, Paul admonishes each to “nourish and cherish”, the other, meaning that they should look out for the wellbeing, health, and prosperity of the other.

Next, they should be one in thought and purpose as God is. Husband and wife should share everything including their thoughts and emotions, but most importantly, their plans, goals, and dreams. Neither should dominate the other nor make a plea for rulership, but together they should work out their united purpose for their lives.

Finally, they should be one in doctrine in the image of God. They should be united in their faith. They should share their thoughts on God and religion, and should dialogue with each other on Bible passages, meditating and praying together. As they draw closer to God they will draw closer to each other spiritually. They will complement each other perfectly and this union will be a true reflection of God’s image.

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2016
PLANBOOK



REACH THE WORLD

HEALTHY FAMILIES FOR ETERNITY

— WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER —



Christian Marriage and the Cross

ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER

The Text

THEN HE SAID TO THEM ALL,
“IF ANYONE DESIRES TO COME AFTER
ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF, AND
TAKE UP HIS CROSS DAILY, AND
FOLLOW ME. FOR WHOEVER DESIRES
TO SAVE HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, BUT
WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR MY
SAKE WILL SAVE IT.
LUKE 9:23-24

Introduction

We enjoy food! People frequently ask us what we do about eating when our frequent ministry travel takes us to different parts of the world. Our answer is often the same, we like all kinds of foods.

Over the years we have developed an appreciation for foods from all over the world, and welcome the opportunity to taste diverse cuisines on each of our travel itineraries. Indian, Latin American, Italian, Caribbean, Mexican, Thai, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, East African, West African, Southern African, Russian, Middle Eastern, American and Eastern European dishes. We enjoy them all.

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The biggest challenge with food, however, is when we get home from a trip. What should we eat and where? Shall we go to an Indian, Cuban or Thai restaurant or should we eat at home? Deciding whose palate to satisfy has everything to do with the quality of our marriage at that time.

Our sermon today is titled Christian Marriage and the Cross. Let us pray.

The life of self denial

Luke 9:23-24, records the following poignant words of Jesus: “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.’”

The context of Luke 9 finds Jesus with His disciples dispensing power over demons and diseases, sending them to preach the good news of the gospel, listening to their exciting mission experiences, then performing a miraculous feeding of five thousand on the outskirts of the city of Bethsaida.

After an interlude for prayer, Jesus resumes the conversation with His disciples, asking for a report on what people were saying about Him, apparently triggered by Herod the Tetrarch’s inquiry earlier in the chapter. Some people proposed that Jesus was John the Baptist who

had risen from the dead, while others suggested he could be Elijah. Jesus, however, was really interested to know who the disciples thought He was and what they were saying about Him. In response to the question posed by Jesus, Peter answers: “The Christ of God.”

The conversation between disciples and Master transitions into a reality check about the reasons Jesus came to earth. More importantly, this dialog was about making clear that the power the disciples had received from Jesus and witnessed in amazing splendor at the feeding of the large multitude, was not for personal gain or prestige; it served to convey to lost humanity that God is on their side and is infinitely concerned about their daily cares. Beyond this, the purpose of Jesus’ coming was ultimately to suffer and die to make this preferred life possible, and as disciples of His, their lot would be the same.

Challenges in marriage

Marriage looms prominent in Scripture. In the book of Genesis, marriage appears as the first institution established by God at creation between one man and one woman; and in the book of Revelation marriage is used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between God and His people. The second chapter of the gospel of John finds Jesus performing His first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The fact that marriage appears at the end of the creation week, suggests God’s ideal for the human race. And now a marriage ceremony prominently placed at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry underscores heaven’s regard for this institution.

One of the principal challenges in marriage is that God meant for this relationship to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman. In Genesis 2:24 the Bible states: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” In a discussion with the Pharisees about the possibility of divorce, Jesus quotes Genesis 2 when He states in Matthew 19:4-6:

“AND HE ANSWERED AND SAID TO THEM, ‘HAVE YOU NOT READ THAT HE WHO MADE THEM AT THE BEGINNING MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, AND SAID, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH? SO THEN, THEY ARE NO LONGER TWO BUT ONE FLESH. THEREFORE WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN SEPARATE.’”

What is it that makes marriage challenging? Why the preoccupation with divorce? So many relationships that begin with great excitement and euphoria, so much so that the parties feel emotional pain when they are apart from each other, seem to fizzle within a few weeks, months or years after the wedding day.

Not long ago we received a question from a man for one of the magazine columns we write. The question included in our book *Real Family Talk*¹, is the following:

“I NEVER THOUGHT THIS WOULD HAPPEN TO ME, BUT I FIND MYSELF VERY UNHAPPY IN MY MARRIAGE. MY WIFE AND I JUST DON’T COMMUNICATE WELL, AND WHEN WE DO, WE YELL AT EACH OTHER AND THERE IS A LOT OF TENSION BETWEEN US. WE DON’T SEEM TO BE COMPATIBLE AND HAVE VERY FEW INTERESTS IN COMMON. HOW CAN SUCH A DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP SURVIVE? THIS CANNOT POSSIBLY BE HEALTHY FOR OUR CHILDREN. I DON’T BELIEVE GOD EXPECTS ME TO STAY IN SUCH AN UNHAPPY RELATIONSHIP. WHAT DO YOU THINK?”

Interesting question, isn’t it? And one that many married people are asking out loud and sometimes in silence. What happened, we ask, to the excitement and closeness that was so overt before marriage, that was often a little embarrassing to family and friends when the two people in love were almost literally suffocating each other at the dinner table.

What happened is that when people are dating (courting in many parts of the world) opposites attract. On the other hand, in marriage opposites tend to repel. This is what makes marriage so challenging. As sinners, we are inherently selfish. We are in love with our own opinions and want everything to go our way. The Bible states in Isaiah 53:6a: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way...”

And it takes only a few weeks or months after the honeymoon infatuation has finally dissipated, to make the spouses impatient and nasty with each other, everyone turning to his own way.

Choices in marriage

God created marriage for our happiness and joy. For marriage and other relationships to be sustainable, we must follow the principles given by God. In Galatians 5:22-23 the Bible declares: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”

Think about it. If these principles (fruit) are operative in our relationships—especially marriage—when there are differences of opinion, tastes, likes and dislikes; practicing bearing the fruit mentioned by Paul, will allow us to handle variances with kindness, gentleness and goodness, rather than anger, roughness and indifference.

No marriage in the Bible is a model marriage. Except for Adam and Eve before the fall, every subsequent human marriage has been imperfect. To have a Christian marriage we must choose to be in a Christian marriage, which is only functional when we employ spiritual values given to us by God in the Bible. Choosing a Christian marriage is like choosing to be a Christian. It is a decision we must make every day, like eating and breathing, to remain healthy and strong. For marriage to remain vibrant and viable, the people in the marriage must regularly nurture their marriage, or soon it will become feeble and die.

Making good choices in marriage is choosing to practice the counsel of Ephesians 5:15-17 that says: “See that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Also in Proverbs 1:5 it says: “A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel.”

On the realities of marriage and the choices spouses must make to keep their union strong, Ellen G White² offers the following:

“AFFECTION MAY BE AS CLEAR AS CRYSTAL AND BEAUTEOUS IN ITS PURITY, YET IT MAY BE SHALLOW BECAUSE IT HAS NOT BEEN TESTED AND TRIED. MAKE CHRIST FIRST AND LAST AND BEST IN EVERYTHING. CONSTANTLY BEHOLD HIM, AND YOUR LOVE FOR HIM WILL DAILY BECOME DEEPER AND STRONGER AS IT IS SUBMITTED TO THE TEST OF TRIAL. AND AS YOUR LOVE FOR HIM INCREASES, YOUR LOVE FOR EACH OTHER WILL GROW DEEPER AND STRONGER.”

Commitment in marriage

Commitment is at the foundation of every healthy and deeply fulfilling marriage. It is a decision that every married person has to make if he or she is to remain married. Christian marriage in this respect, is not unlike all other marriages that are in it for the long haul. Every person has to decide on their level of commitment, which will be commensurate with their level of marital satisfaction.

Like other relationships in life, marriage also experiences fluctuations. We often say there are no perfect marriages because there are no perfect people. So, perfection is not synonymous to commitment. However, commitment is *sine qua non* (indispensable) for every viable marital relationship, just like oxygen is needed to keep living.

Noted marriage and family researcher, Scott M Stanley³ suggests there are two types of commitments: dedication and constraint.

Dedication is like an internalized commitment to a project or a person. It expresses a person's greatest desire and interest in making sure that something happens. On the other hand, constraint is more like an obligation to do something that left undone would be catastrophic. While dedication is like an influence compelling you to go forward, constraint is like a power pushing you from behind.

Dedication is operative in the Apostle Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, declaring:

“LOVE IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND. IT DOES NOT ENVY, IT DOES NOT BOAST, IT IS NOT PROUD. IT DOES NOT DISHONOR OTHERS...IT IS NOT EASILY ANGERED, IT KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS. LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH. IT ALWAYS PROTECTS, ALWAYS TRUSTS, ALWAYS HOPES, ALWAYS PERSEVERES. LOVE NEVER FAILS...” (NIV)

Every marriage relationship needs both dedication and constraint commitment; the higher the level of dedication in the relationship, the higher the level of satisfaction will be as well. In those moments when dedication is low, constraint commitment will enable couples to make it through the dark valleys that often affect marriage relationships. However, each person in the marriage needs to be committed to regaining dedication commitment as quickly as possible, so that marriage can be, as Ellen White suggests, “a little heaven upon earth...”⁴

Conclusion

We both enjoy food! And while we are intentional about being temperate not only about what we eat, but how much we eat, it is also true that we relish certain foods more than others and eat them with greater frequency.

Deciding where we will eat—what kind of food that is—after being on the road

for several days and finally getting home, determines to a great extent the quality of our marriage at that particular time. This is the test, to a great extent, how well we are practicing what we preach and how close to Jesus we have remained.

The truth is, Christian marriage can only be Christian when like true disciples we take up our cross and follow Jesus in self-denial, self-sacrifice, and being like Him in every way. Being baptized church members is not enough to keep our marriage healthy and strong.

Understanding that to be a disciple means you have signed up to serve rather than to be served; and you are looking for what you can give rather than what you can get, is the secret to having a marriage filled with dedication commitment, that represents Jesus Christ without shame.

A crisis in marriage means there is a spiritual crisis, regardless of how many Bible studies you are involved in or how many people you are leading to baptism. However, when you see your marriage in the light of the cross, you willingly take it up in Christ-like fashion, then you will experience the joy that comes from trusting Jesus to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. This is the kind of marriage that becomes salvific to your spouse, to your children, and to everyone who is within your circle of influence.

As you purpose in your heart to take up your cross today, it is our prayer that your marriage will experience the transformational power that brings joy, peace and love. In the words of John Hugh McNaughton's (1829-1891) song,

LOVE AT HOME

IN THE COTTAGE THERE IS JOY,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;
HATE AND ENVY NE'ER ANNOY,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;
ROSES BLOOM BENEATH OUR FEET,
ALL THE EARTH'S A GARDEN SWEET,
MAKING LIFE A BLISS COMPLETE,
WHEN THERE IS LOVE AT HOME.

LOVE BECOMES A WAY OF LIFE,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;

SWEET, INSISTENT END TO STRIFE,
WHEN THERE IS LOVE AT HOME;
GLAD SUBMISSION EACH ONE'S GIFT,
WILLING PLEDGE TO LOVE AND LIFT,
HEALING BALM FOR EVERY RIFT,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME.

ANGER COOLS AND PRESSURES CEASE,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;
CHILDREN LEARN TO LIVE IN PEACE,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;
COURAGE TO REACH OUT IN GRACE,
MEET A STRANGER FACE TO FACE,
FIND A RECONCILING PLACE,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME.

THERE'S NO QUESTION YOU CAN'T ASK
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME;
THERE IS STRENGTH FOR ANY TASK,
WHEN THERE IS LOVE AT HOME;
SHARING JOY IN WORK OR PLAY,
CONFIDENCE TO FACE THE DAY,

KNOWING LOVE WILL FIND A WAY,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME.

REFRAIN:
LOVE AT HOME, LOVE AT HOME;
KNOWING LOVE WILL FIND A WAY,
WHEN THERE'S LOVE AT HOME.

May God bless you to this end is our prayer.

Notes

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Building Marriage And Family

TRAFFORD FISCHER

The Text

“AND I LOOKED AND AROSE AND SAID TO THE NOBLES AND TO THE OFFICIALS AND TO THE REST OF THE PEOPLE, “DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEM. REMEMBER THE LORD, WHO IS GREAT AND AWESOME, AND FIGHT FOR YOUR BROTHERS, YOUR SONS, YOUR DAUGHTERS, YOUR WIVES, AND YOUR HOMES.”

NEHEMIAH 4:14

The Old Testament records several occasions when the kings of Babylon and Persia took residents of Jerusalem captives. We don't know the names of all those who were forced from their homes but we know that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were included among the captives taken by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon; Nehemiah was taken to Susa by the king of Persia.

We also know that these men were appointed as leaders in their new community even though they were slaves and captives. It is not known how or why, but Nehemiah was appointed a cup-bearer to the king. The king must have considered him a reliable and trustworthy captive.

One day, Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, who still lived in Jerusalem, arrived in Susa with

some other men to visit Nehemiah. Nehemiah asked them how things were back home in Jerusalem, and the report wasn't positive at all. They replied, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burnt with fire.” (Nehemiah 1:3).

Nehemiah loved Jerusalem and was distressed at this news. He sat down to mourn and weep for his city and its people; he fasted and prayed for several days. Nehemiah had never been sad in the presence of the king. When he returned to the king's service, the king said to him: “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart” (Nehemiah 2:2).

What an insightful king! What an incredible gift—to notice when someone is sad and encourage him or her to share his or her sorrow. We often get so busy we hardly notice when someone is hurting. We rush past and miss their pain. We say hello and don't take the time to see the hurt in their eyes, the furrowed brow of worry or the tears of pain. We need to ask God to help us be as the king of Persia—to be quick to say to those we see hurting—‘You are sad, and it would seem this is not because you are sick—this must be sadness of the heart,’ and offer them appropriate comfort and support.

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With fear and trepidation, Nehemiah tells the king how things are back in Jerusalem, and the king asks him what he would like to do. Nehemiah replies that he would like to return and rebuild Jerusalem. It is surprising that the king told him to go back and do exactly that! He also provided Nehemiah letters to the various governors in the territories to guarantee his safety while providing army officers to ensure his security. (Nehemiah 2:6-10).

So Nehemiah headed back to Jerusalem and after three days took a few men with him to inspect the city. His brother's report was accurate. The walls were crumbling and in some places had completely fallen. The gates were burnt and useless. But Nehemiah doesn't get disheartened or discouraged. He rolls up his sleeves and gets to work! He called the city leaders and said, "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (Nehemiah 2:17). He also told them about the gracious hand of God that was upon him in Susa and what the king had said to him. The people replied, "Let us start rebuilding" (Nehemiah 2:18). Nehemiah gains their support and engages all the families into rebuilding the walls. Section by section they remove the rubble and replace the stones.

In Nehemiah chapter 3, we find a list of many of those who joined in repairing the gates and walls. Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work to rebuild the Sheep Gate (Nehemiah 3:1); the sons of Hassenah rebuilt the Fish Gate (Nehemiah 3:3); Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section, and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, joined in (Nehemiah 3:8). In verse 12 it mentions that Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters. This was a real family-project! And they worked with focus and energy. Nehemiah reports that "the people worked with all their hearts." (Nehemiah 4:6).

There's something exciting about working together as families on a common project and especially when we do it "with all our hearts." Families that join hand-in-hand in service to

the community and minister with love and grace make a profound difference to others and develop a strong sense of family 'togetherness.' Albert Schweitzer said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."¹ And John Wesley adds this wonderful directive: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can."²

Our Churches will thrive when all the families work together in their church "with all their hearts." Some time ago a church member told me that he wasn't happy with his church. He said the church should be doing more for the needy in the community! I said to him, "Which family, or families in your church, should be doing more for the community?" He looked at me with surprise, so I asked him again, "which particular family or families should be doing more?" He thought for a while, and then smiled and said, "I guess I should be doing more." The church is a "family of families."

Our church today is made up of a whole gathering of families. The church isn't some nebulous 'thing' that exists to be complained about or ridiculed or regarded as a supplier of all good things! It's a big family of families! Here is a key reason we need to put time and energy into our relationships and make a real commitment to strengthen and enrich our marriages and families. If we have strong marriages and healthy families, we will have a strong and healthy church. This is something we need to do "with all our hearts."

Well, the wall building in Jerusalem was successful and exciting until Sanballat and Tobiah and a few locals in the community heard about it. These people didn't like what they saw! They didn't want this city getting back into shape. They felt much safer when the city was in shambles. So they created trouble. They harassed the builders and called out discouraging and disparaging comments. Tobiah the Ammonite called out, "If even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (Nehemiah 4:3). The wall-builders become discouraged and fearful. They

are concerned for their personal safety (Nehemiah 4:10-12). Nehemiah takes this threat to heart and sets out to deal with it!

Now notice chapter 4, verse 14: “After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

Remember The Lord

Nehemiah provides the best answer to his people’s concerns: “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.” Friends, we serve an awesome God. We do not worship a weak or helpless God. We are not disciples of some puff of wind or some pretend god, nor do we serve an unknown god. Our God is great and awesome and we are the apple of His eye; the lost sheep rescued by His own hands; his prodigal sons and daughters who, when He “sees us from afar off,” runs to greet us and welcomes us home (Luke 15:20). He is not a distant, harsh judge; not a callous ruler who reluctantly hands out rewards for the few. Our God is great and awesome and personally invested in us as His people.

Fight For Your Relationships

Now notice what Nehemiah says to the people. After pointing them to their awesome God, he then says, “Fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” (Nehemiah 4:14).

Nehemiah said to the people, ‘Our God is great and awesome. So sit back and do nothing. Just go about life as you always do and leave it to Him!’ NO, this is not what we read in this verse! He said, “Fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

On a number of occasions in Scripture God invited His people to stand still and see His power in action. He said to Moses, “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:14). But on so many other occasions God called for action. When Jesus healed people He called them to action: “stretch out your

hand,” “take up your bed,” “go and wash in the pool.”

Nehemiah was saying to the people, “These are serious times. This is a crisis! We need to stand up for our families and do everything we can to protect them and keep them whole! We cannot afford just to float along and hope for the best. It’s time to act!’

As a child I can recall my mother saying many times, “Don’t just stand there! Do something!” Nehemiah called his families to action. ‘Don’t just stand there and worry or fret: recognise that your God is an awesome God, and step into action.’

When I was a teenager, I joined my older brother and four other friends on a three-day canoe trip down a winding and log-filled river! We had to be alert to the potential danger of obstructions and possible damage to our canoes and our lives. One of my friends sat in the front of our four-man canoe and his task was to alert us of any upcoming dangers so we could take the necessary action to keep safe on the river. This meant that we had to row together to get ourselves out of any danger. Unfortunately my friend didn’t always get it right! If he saw a log in the river a long way off he would call out “log” and row frantically in any direction. But if all of a sudden a log appeared just in front and it was now very important that we all row, he would ‘freeze’! He would become so frightened that he just sat there still.

Nehemiah couldn’t afford to have his people frozen in fear when it was time to act. Nor could he afford to have his people unaware of the need to work together with energy and commitment. This wasn’t the time to just stand there—this was the time to ‘do something.’ It’s time to row! There are dangers in the river and they are straight ahead.

Build And Protect

Now notice chapter 4, verses 16 and 17: “From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour. The officers

posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other.”

They ‘built’ with one hand, and ‘protected’ with the other! Nehemiah’s plan is simple but bold—‘build’ and ‘protect.’ He doesn’t concentrate solely on building while leaving his people vulnerable, nor does he spend his energy and resources protecting but living in a heap of rubble. He builds, and protects.

Crumbling Relationships

In our communities there are many marriages and families that are crumbling walls and burnt gates. Sadly, within our church we may have couples that feel their marriage is crumbling and are struggling to hold their marriage together. Families may feel like gates that are falling off their hinges. As God’s families—families who live and serve a great and awesome God—we must work together and fight for what we believe to be important. We need to carefully assess our cultures and customs and not allow ourselves to be squeezed into the mold of a different world. We need to decide what changes we can live with and what changes we cannot. We need to decide where we draw a line and make a stand. We can’t afford to float along with our eyes shut and hope for the best. The old saying is still true—“a dead fish floats with the stream, it’s a live one that swims against the current.”

God-Shaped Marriages

One of the most powerful images God has in mind for us as married couples and families is found in Ephesians. Paul states: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her... In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church...” (Ephesians 5:25-29).

The marriage relationship is a symbol of God’s love for His people. A married couple makes a statement to the world about how much God loves us! This is a very significant challenge presented today to all of us in the church who are married. God has declared that a marriage between a husband and wife is to be a powerful statement to all that God loves His people as we love each other. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if people were to look at the way we express our love to each other and say, “God must love His people deeply!”

Paul encouraged the men of the Ephesus Church to love their wives, he encouraged the wives to respect their husbands. “However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (Ephesians 5:33). There’s no hint that they should give up on their relationships when times get difficult, or see them as too hard to commit to building and enriching. Paul introduced the principle of reciprocity: Husbands, must love their wives and wives must respect their husbands.

And it’s the same principle for the children. Paul says, “Children, obey your parents.” (Ephesians 6:1). That suggests parents must make it easy to be honoured. Then he says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children” (Ephesians 6:4). In Colossians it says: “Do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21). Children, that means you will do all you can not to hassle your parents.

Research continues to demonstrate the powerful impact a strong marriage and happy family have on many aspects of life. Happy marriages and families contribute to better health, longer life, a greater sense of personal happiness and well-being. It also contributes to a better quality of life, less difficulties at school for children, less problems associated with drugs and alcohol, and less behavioral problems for children and adolescents.³

We are invited to build and protect our marriages and families. We are encouraged to fight for our brothers, and sisters, and parents,

and children, and our homes. This is a definite trumpet-call to invest in our families, irrespective of their description or shape! Your family may be different from mine! Some of you may have experienced changes in your family that you never dreamed possible. Some of you may have lost a partner and you miss them terribly. Some may have family members who no longer form a regular part of family life. Some of you may be single parents, or you may be ‘grandparent-parents—you are full-time caregivers of your grandchildren!’ Some of you may be dreaming of family and hoping to start as soon as possible! Some of you are happy to be you and feel no current need to be in a permanent relationship.

The invitation to all of us is the same, “build and protect.” We must make a commitment to do all we can to ensure our relationships are the best. Let’s put in the hard work to make them everything God would wish them to be.

Those who are married, here is a message from Hart & Morris (2003): “Staying married and working on your marriage may be a risk, but so is walking away from it. Choosing to try again puts you back in a vulnerable place, but so does casting yourself upon unsheltered waters... Fostering a close emotional connection and working toward a healthy relationship is very possible, no matter how bad your marriage may seem to be. God will hear the cry of your hurting and lonely heart. He will meet you where you are.”

Scripture makes it clear that while our relationships may reflect the brokenness that’s part of our days, they may also, under the grace and encouragement of God, paint a picture of His endless and inexhaustible love and grace.

Conclusion

What a challenge for us as Christians! What a challenge for us as God’s people—to learn to be genuine and true lovers in a world short on love; to learn to encourage and affirm each other in a world short on encouragement and support; to know what it is to love and be loved; to know what it is to be a friend and soul-mate; and to find new ways to build connections with others that declare to the world the immense nature of God’s love.

Wouldn’t it be best if our relationships, our marriages, and our families were strong and resilient and a declaration to the Sanballats and the Tobiahs in our society that we intend to be around for a while?

In conclusion the wise man Solomon gives the following counsel: “Place me like a seal over your heart... for love is as strong as death... Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.” (Song of Solomon 8:6-7). It’s my sincere wish that nothing will be able to quench the love you have for your awesome God and for one another. May nothing at all ever wash it away.

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Notes

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And They Lived Happily Ever After

WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

WHEN YOUR MARRIAGE IS STRUGGLING, THE WORLD FEELS LIKE A SHAKY PLACE. BUT WHEN IT IS STRONG, YOU FEEL LIKE YOU CAN TAKE ON THE WORLD! MARRIAGE EXPERTS WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER SHARE THE PRINCIPLES THAT CAN MAKE YOUR MARRIAGE BETTER THAN EVER.

Do you have a great marriage with a few sad times, or a sad marriage with a few great times? Your response to that question will reveal whether you feel connected—or disconnected—with your spouse.

Most couples go into marriage expecting to have a terrific time. Why then are so many couples experiencing distress rather than the bliss they expected when they first got married?

All of us know families that appear toxic in their daily interactions. The parents are constantly arguing, while the children often ignore directives from their parents and seem to be doing their own thing. Notwithstanding, just staying together year

after long year and seemingly managing their chaos demonstrates a high level of commitment. But for those of us who watch from a distance, it all seems highly stressful and quite dysfunctional.

On the other hand, it is a joy to watch families whose commitment to each other is characterized by a high level of kindness, compassion, patience, forgiveness, humility, and teamwork. In reality, even though the family seems like a well-oiled machine, they face as many challenges as the previous one. The difference is that they have practiced and learned how to handle life's daily stresses with a high level of grace, skill, and humor.

So which of these two options does your family most closely resemble?

The truth is, there are no perfect marriages because there are no perfect people. So, when we talk about having a marriage that feels connected, we are not talking about a marriage that has no problems. Rather, we are describing a couple that enjoys relatively high levels of satisfaction and stability in their marital relationship. In a connected marriage, the couple is intentional about fixing problems in their relationship and is committed to being kind, patient, understanding, and forgiving. To be sure, it takes commitment to remain connected in marriage and to build on the dreams each person brought to the marriage. But this kind of commitment is worth it: it contributes to the couple's happiness, health, and quality of life.

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To experience the joys that marriage was meant to bring, it's important to keep these time-tested principles in mind:

TO MAKE IT THROUGH THE YEARS, YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT THROUGH THE DAYS—ONE DAY AT A TIME.

We recently celebrated 30 years of marriage. Our marriage has not been all fun and games, but celebrated is the perfect word to describe what we feel when we look back at all of the emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual experiences we've had together. As we look back, we know that our marriage has been an extraordinary and satisfying experience we would do all over again: it is the place where we have found the most emotional support, connection, and safety.

But, in order to make it through the years, we had to make it through the days—one at a time. A husband and wife must be intentional about connecting with each other in meaningful ways every day—listening to each other, holding hands, doing acts of kindness. It's through the little things in life that you convey to your spouse that they have special value to you.

TRYING TO GROW A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT HEALTHY COMMUNICATION IS LIKE ATTEMPTING TO MAKE APPLE JUICE WITHOUT APPLES.

Over the years, these small daily encounters add up, building a marriage that feels safe to the couple, a marriage that can withstand difficulties along the way. In their book *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, sociologist Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher describe the security that comes from a committed marriage:

“HUSBANDS AND WIVES OFFER EACH OTHER COMPANIONSHIP, SEX, PARTNERSHIP, BUT THEY ALSO OFFER EACH OTHER A TYPE OF INSURANCE THAT IS BETTER THAN ANY POLICY EITHER OF THEM COULD BUY TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST LIFE'S UNEXPECTED EVENTS.”

Trying to grow a strong relationship without healthy communication is like attempting to make apple juice without apples. It is simply impossible. Healthy communication is the principal skill in maintaining marriage intimacy. The more intimate the relationship becomes, the more sensitive and humble the communication must be.

MARRIAGE ISN'T JUST ABOUT RAISING KIDS AND SPLITTING CHORES.

Prominent psychologist John M. Gottman, author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, proposes: “Marriage isn't just about raising kids, splitting chores, and making love. It can also have a spiritual dimension that has to do with creating an inner life together—a culture rich with symbols and rituals.”

The Bible states, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11, NKJV). This is how couples create an inner life together—by treating words as precious and communicating as if giving gifts of gold and silver.

THE QUALITY OF YOUR MARRIAGE DEPENDS ON THE QUALITY OF YOUR COMMUNICATION.

The quality of your marriage will depend on the quality of your communication. Couples who communicate frequently and tenderly experience a level of intimacy that couples who communicate infrequently and harshly can never reach.

YOUR SPOUSE HAS AN EMOTIONAL BANK ACCOUNT. DEPOSIT MORE THAN YOU WITHDRAW.

The emotional bank account is like any other bank account: you can only make withdrawals from an account that has something in it. In a bank account, if you're making more withdrawals than deposits, pretty soon there will be no money available. The same is true of the marriage relationship. You can't expect to get, get, get without putting something into the account first. When you are kind to your spouse, you are making deposits in their emotional account. The more deposits you make, the more rich your relationship will be. The opposite—trying to get more than you give—leads to a relationship that is bankrupt.

So, how are you doing with deposits in your spouse's emotional bank account? Are you kind, patient, affirming, loving, and forgiving on a regular basis? Or, are you more commonly sarcastic, impatient, critical, demanding, and crude?

IF YOU DON'T LET THINGS GO, YOU WILL BECOME BITTER AND ANGRY.

Forgiveness is another essential element in your journey of enhancing your relationships. The ancient wisdom of Ephesians 4:31, 32 offers

this timeless counsel: "Get rid of your bitterness, hot tempers, anger, loud quarreling, cursing, and hatred. Be kind to each other, sympathetic, forgiving each other as God has forgiven you through Christ".

The problems listed in that passage—bitterness, hot tempers, anger, loud quarreling, cursing, hatred—can easily escalate, building one upon the other. So it's better to stop the cycle as soon as it begins—and that usually means letting something go before it sets off bitterness (and everything else that will follow).

Bitterness is an established resentment that poisons the entire inner person. Our spouse does something we don't like, so we harbor bitterness against them, and hot tempers start to boil. That leads to anger, which is the blast on the outside of the feelings on the inside. Anger invariably leads to loud quarreling or cursing. Sometimes we would do well to let things blow over instead of letting them blow up.

So then, how about your marriage? Have you been contributing to healthy or toxic interactions? Can you be honest with yourself about what you have (or have not been doing) to add to the distress or improvement of your marriage? Are you determined to do all you can to make your marriage a place where your spouse feels safe, cared for, and affirmed?

It takes effort to build a great marriage, but it's worth it. If you make the commitment to stay connected, your marriage will not just survive the years but will thrive in your daily life.



2015
PLANBOOK



REVIVAL & REFORMATION

BUILDING FAMILY MEMORIES

— ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER —



Building Lasting Memories

ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER

The Texts

Song of Solomon 2:7; 4:7; 8:7; 1:2

I CHARGE YOU, O DAUGHTERS OF
JERUSALEM BY THE GAZELLES OR BY THE
DOES OF THE FIELD, DO NOT STIR UP
NOR AWAKEN LOVE UNTIL IT PLEASES.
V. 2:7

YOU ARE ALL FAIR, MY LOVE, AND THERE
IS NO SPOT IN YOU. V. 4:7

MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE,
NOR CAN THE FLOODS DROWN IT. IF A
MAN WOULD GIVE FOR LOVE ALL THE
WEALTH OF HIS HOUSE, IT WOULD BE
UTTERLY DESPISED. V. 8:7

LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF
HIS MOUTH—FOR YOUR LOVE IS BETTER
THAN WINE. V. 1:2

Introduction

To celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary a few months ago, we spent five days at the beach. We love beach vacations. Especially where there is beautiful fine sand and clear blue water.

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Our time together was simply incredible. We relaxed, caught up on some reading, ate food we didn't cook, enjoyed swimming and snorkeling, body-boarding and kayaking. While there was much to enjoy, our favorite lasting memory was learning to sail.

As soon as our sailing lesson began, we realized there was much more complexity to this sport than appeared on the surface. It was at once stressful and relaxing, challenging and rewarding. We quickly realized we would need to work together as a team and be on the same side of the catamaran (sail boat) if we were to experience gliding smoothly across the beautiful waters.

God created marriage so that human beings would have an opportunity to build lasting memories, leaving a legacy onto the third and fourth generations. While the process has challenging moments, the rewards are out of this world.

Our sermon today is titled, *Building Lasting Memories*, let us pray.

The Reality of Marriage and Its Problems

We still remember our honeymoon as if it were yesterday. While we could only spend a few days at the beach because of our budget, we had a fantastic time. Not that everything was flawless.

Nevertheless, we were finally married after dating long distance for a year. Life felt settled, serene and still. We were now ready to face the rest of our lives together.

Although just married for twenty-four hours, we knew we would be fine as long as we were together. We loved each other, and nothing and no one could disturb our harmony. We had arrived at a place of contentment and satisfaction in our lives.

But is it possible within the domain of human capacity to keep love always sheltered from injury or hurt? And even if we could, is *love*—we are talking about the romantic feelings and ecstasy of early marriage—enough to sustain a marriage? The answer in our opinion is no.

The Meaning of Love

What is love, after all? It seems to be the catch-all in relationships. We fall in love and fall out of love. But is that really what love is?

These days the word *love* seems to be used to refer to all kinds of situations. We hear people say: “I love apple pie,” or “I love to exercise every day,” or “I love to nap after lunch,” or “I love to cook and bake,” or “I love to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.” It is amazing how love is used in language to convey people’s affinity to something or an activity.

We propose it is probably one of the reasons we have such difficulty in marriage. For if you love your husband or wife the way you love to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; or the way you love to exercise or cook and bake, it is a bit problematic, and chances are it won’t make your marriage a success. Consequently, we must come to grips with the true meaning of love; at the very least, come to terms with what role God meant for love to play in our marriage relationships.

Love in the Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon provides us with a sequence of snapshots of the relationship between a man and a woman. The ecstasy and complexity that convey what love—*real love*—is all about.

LIKE GEN. 2:23–25, THE SONG CELEBRATES GOD’S GIFT OF BODILY LOVE BETWEEN MAN AND

WOMAN. HERE THE CREATOR’S WISDOM AND BOUNTY ARE DISPLAYED. THUS, THE SONG IS BEST TAKEN AS AN EXAMPLE OF ISRAEL’S WISDOM POETRY (CP. PROV. 5:15–20; 6:24–29; 7:6–27; 30:18–20). LIKE MANY PSALMS THAT PRAISE GOD AND ALSO TEACH, THE SONG’S MAIN PURPOSE IS TO CELEBRATE RATHER THAN TO INSTRUCT. (VAN LEEUWEN, 2003).

Song of Solomon 2:7 states: “Oh, let me warn you, sisters in Jerusalem, by the gazelles, yes, by all the wild deer: Don’t excite love, don’t stir it up, until the time is ripe—and you are ready.” (The Message)

THE MEANING OF THE REFRAIN IS THAT LOVE CANNOT BE FORCED BUT MUST BE PATIENTLY WAITED FOR. IN OTHER WORDS, THE BELOVED REMINDED ALL THOSE DESIRING A RELATIONSHIP LIKE THE ONE SHE AND SOLOMON ENJOYED WAITING PATIENTLY FOR GOD TO BRING IT INTO THEIR LIVES. GAZELLES (2:17; CF. V. 17; 3:5; 4:5; 7:3; 8:14) AND DOES ARE GRACEFUL, AGILE ANIMALS. IT WAS NATURAL FOR A BELOVED ONE, THINKING OF THE FIELDS AND FORESTS (2:1, 3), TO MAKE AN OATH BY MOUNTAIN ANIMALS. (DEERE, 1985).

The message is clear. Love—the love God wants us to experience in relationships—is so delightful, so magnificent, so superb, He wants us to be truly ready for it—spiritually, physically, financially, emotionally—or we will just mess things up. Beware of puppy love; it will lead to a dog’s life.

The Song of Solomon, originally written in Hebrew, has at least three words for our English word love. The first word we share is *rayah*; which is literally translated *friend* or *companion*—somebody with whom you enjoy hanging out. Song of Solomon 4:7 says: “You are beautiful from head to toe, my dear love, beautiful beyond compare, absolutely flawless.” (The Message)

SOLOMON SUMMARIZED HIS PRAISE BY ASCRIBING PERFECT BEAUTY TO HIS BRIDE. SHE HAD NO FLAW, OR PHYSICAL DEFECT. SHE WAS PERFECT IN

APPEARANCE. (LATER SHE CALLED HIM “MY FLAWLESS ONE,” 5:2.) SOLOMON PRAISED EIGHT PARTS OF HIS BRIDE’S BODY... COMPARED WITH THIS LAVISH PRAISE OF THE BELOVED’S BEAUTY, SOME WIVES TODAY MAY FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE ABOUT THEIR APPEARANCE. HOWEVER, ONE MUST REMEMBER THAT INITIALLY THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM DID NOT SEEM TO REGARD THE BELOVED AS A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN. UNLIKE THE OTHER ROYAL LADIES SHE WAS NOT FAIR-SKINNED, A PREEMINENT SIGN OF BEAUTY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD (SEE COMMENTS ON 1:5–6). YET IN HER LOVER’S EYES SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL, EVEN THOUGH SHE DID NOT MEET THE OBJECTIVE STANDARDS OF BEAUTY IN HER SOCIETY... THOUGH FEW PEOPLE IN ANY AGE MEET THEIR PARTICULAR CULTURE’S STANDARD OF BEAUTY, A WOMAN IS BEAUTIFUL IN THE EYES OF HER LOVER SIMPLY BECAUSE HE LOVES HER. EVERY HUSBAND WHO GENUINELY LOVES HIS WIFE CAN SAY, “TO ME YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL AND THERE IS NO FLAW IN YOU.” (DEERE, 1985).

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We love to spend time together. Married for over 30 years now and having the privilege of working together—it is not for the faint of heart—we have all kinds of favorite things, activities and places. We have favorite restaurants, favorite parks, favorite museums, favorite beaches, favorite cities, favorite malls, favorite zoos (the Serengeti), favorite flowers, favorite meals and many more than we have already shared. We are simply grateful God brought us together, and we try to celebrate that reality every day. I (Willie) think Elaine is absolutely beautiful. Now, to others she may not be all that. They may not see what I see. But to me, there is none better. I am talking about inside and out. She is mine, and she is beautiful!

Working with couples and families is gratifying to us. It is hard work, but it is rewarding work. However, after spending a weekend on our feet speaking at a couples’ retreat, or spending several days training pastors or church leaders, one of our favorite things to do is to find a good Indian restaurant to have a meal together. While we try

to be temperate and careful, we simply enjoy food and find it a reason to celebrate God and life while eating a great meal of chana masala, baigan bharta, dal makhani—rice, of course—and tandoori roti. The truth is, it is simply about hanging out with each other and enjoying each other’s company. It is all about the *rayah* love.

Another Hebrew word for love is *’ahabah*, which is much deeper and reflective than temporary amorous feelings. We are talking about more than a short-lived desire or lust for another person—perhaps someone you see from a distance on the street or in the grocery store you happen to think is attractive. *’Ahabah* is making a conscious choice to join your life to the life of another person. It is an emotion that guides you to commitment—a relationship that is priceless. Song of Solomon 8:7 declares: “Many waters cannot quench love, nor can floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised.”

THE FINAL STATEMENT ABOUT THE LOVE DEPICTED IN THE SONG IS THAT IT IS PRICELESS. ALL ONE’S WEALTH WOULD BE TOTALLY INADEQUATE TO PURCHASE SUCH LOVE. IN FACT, SUCH MONEY WOULD BE ... SCORNE, BECAUSE LOVE CANNOT BE BOUGHT. ANY ATTEMPT TO “BUY” LOVE DEPERSONALIZES IT. IF LOVE IS PRICELESS, HOW THEN CAN IT BE OBTAINED? THE ANSWER IS THAT IT MUST BE GIVEN. AND ULTIMATELY LOVE IS A GIFT FROM GOD. (DEERE, 1985).

The notion of *’ahabah*—love as commitment—is an important one, often missed in marriage, to our demise. It is a concept we need to give much more attention to if we are going to be able to be involved in *building lasting memories* in our respective marriages.

Scott Stanley, a leading marriage and family researcher in the United States, suggests there are two faces of commitment we should consider: dedication and constraint. Personal *dedication* refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the marriage. It is demonstrated by a desire to not only remain in the marriage,

but also to make it better, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the spouse's happiness, not simply one's own. On the other hand, *constraint* commitment refers to forces that compel individuals to preserve their marriage regardless of their personal *dedication* to it. *Constraint* may come from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by seeing the end of their marriage as more economically, socially, personally or psychologically costly. If *dedication* is low, *constraint* can keep people in relationships they might otherwise want to leave. (Stanley 2005, pp. 23, 24).

Because we are human, we make mistakes, even in our marriage, and unless we have commitment love in our relationships—the 'ahabah factor—it would be impossible to sustain a marriage and build lasting memories for the future. For marriage to thrive, we need to have *dedication* and *constraint*.

The third Hebrew word for love found in the Song of Songs is the word *dod*, which is translated in English as to carouse, to rock or to fondle. *Dod* is the physical, sexual ingredient of a relationship, as exemplified in Song of Solomon 1:2, which states: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—For your love is better than wine".

THE SONG BEGINS WITH A SOLILOQUY BY THE BELOVED IN WHICH SHE FIRST EXPRESSED HER STRONG DESIRE FOR HER LOVER'S...PHYSICAL AFFECTION...THE RAPID INTERCHANGE BETWEEN THE THIRD PERSON (HIM, V. 2A, AND HIS, VV. 2A, 4B) AND THE SECOND PERSON (YOUR AND YOU, VV. 2B–4A) IS CONFUSING TO MODERN READERS, BUT IT WAS A REGULAR FEATURE OF LOVE POETRY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST. THIS STYLISTIC DEVICE GAVE A STRONG EMOTIONAL QUALITY TO THE POETRY. WHEN SHE SPOKE OF HIS LOVE (V. 2B) SHE WAS REFERRING TO THE PHYSICAL EXPRESSIONS OF HIS LOVE (THE HEB. WORD FOR "LOVE" IS THE PL. DŌDĪM, ALSO USED IN 4:10). THE STATEMENT YOUR LOVE IS MORE DELIGHTFUL THAN WINE MEANS THAT HIS PHYSICAL AFFECTIONS WERE EXHILARATING, REFRESHING, AND A GREAT SOURCE OF JOY (CF. 1:4). (DEERE, 1985).

In 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 the Bible states:

NEVERTHELESS, BECAUSE OF SEXUAL IMMORALITY, LET EACH MAN HAVE HIS OWN WIFE, AND LET EACH WOMAN HAVE HER OWN HUSBAND. LET THE HUSBAND RENDER TO HIS WIFE THE AFFECTION DUE HER, AND LIKEWISE ALSO THE WIFE TO HER HUSBAND. THE WIFE DOES NOT HAVE AUTHORITY OVER HER OWN BODY, BUT THE HUSBAND DOES. AND LIKEWISE THE HUSBAND DOES NOT HAVE AUTHORITY OVER HIS OWN BODY, BUT THE WIFE DOES. DO NOT DEPRIVE ONE ANOTHER EXCEPT WITH CONSENT FOR A TIME, THAT YOU MAY GIVE YOURSELVES TO FASTING AND PRAYER; AND COME TOGETHER AGAIN SO THAT SATAN DOES NOT TEMPT YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR LACK OF SELF-CONTROL.

God wants our marriages to experience the flames of *rayah*, 'ahabah and *dod*, not for our marriages to be consumed, but for our marriages to be able to *build lasting memories* for the future, so we can impact to the third and fourth generations of our lineage. One flame burning all by itself, will never accomplish the connection, commitment, and passion God wants each of us to enjoy in marriage, so we'll experience, joy, peace, satisfaction and security.

How many marriages in our church have you witnessed where all the flames of love are burning as one? When we separate the flames, that love can never truly create a rewarding and fulfilling marital experience. It's like living outside the framework God designed and wired us to live by.

Conclusion

Why is it that life changes after the honeymoon? What happens to our love that was so strong and true? If we stop to think about the matter, we realize no one can sustain the fantasy of a honeymoon. Think about it! We are often in a beautiful place away from home where someone else is making the beds, cooking the food and washing the towels. We have enough clean clothes for the trip, so we don't need to do laundry. We can sleep late, get up late, and do almost anything we wish.

When real life sets in, things change. And the real challenge of being responsible—washing clothes, cooking meals, paying bills, working long hours, going to sleep at a reasonable time so you can wake up on time to get to work become a reality. Living with reality, where from time to time you or your spouse might be less than mature or responsible, is the kind of situation that knocks the wind out of your marriage, because the flames of *rayah*, *'ahabab*, and *dod* may no longer be burning as brightly as they once were. We get careless and it becomes difficult to build lasting memories for the future.

Illustration

Several years ago when we were on safari in the Serengeti we came upon a pride of lions in the middle of the savanna. Our driver stopped, and our guide spoke up and said: “There are lions over there.” We didn’t see the lions and asked: “Where are the lions?” The guide pointed and said: “The lions are right over there.” We still couldn’t see the lions until one of them stood on all fours. Then we could see the lions. We quickly noted the reason we could not see the lion. The lion’s mane and the grass of the savanna were the same color. To be able to see the lions we needed to look carefully to intentionally distinguish the grass from the lions.

The Bible states in 1 Peter 5:8: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” We like the clarity that comes from The Message paraphrase: “Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping.”

The reality is, every human marriage will fail to meet the standard needed to preserve a *building lasting memories* attitude in the home. It is on this note that Ellen White declares:

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST ALONE CAN
MAKE MEN AND WOMEN HAPPY. ALL THE

COMMON WATERS OF LIFE CHRIST CAN
TURN INTO THE WINE OF HEAVEN. THE
HOME THEN BECOMES AS AN EDEN BLISS;
THE FAMILY, A BEAUTIFUL SYMBOL OF THE
FAMILY IN HEAVEN. (WHITE 1952, P. 28).

To be *building lasting memories* for the future in our respective marriages then, we need the presence of Christ to make us accepting, affectionate, appreciative, attentive, calm, caring, compassionate, considerate, committed, dedicated, devoted, dutiful, enthusiastic, faithful, friendly, gentle, intentional, kind, loyal, passionate, patient, perceptive, sympathetic, self-controlled, supportive, tender, thoughtful, and understanding. These attributes and actions can only be accomplished as we depend on the power of God each day.

May we daily invite God into our lives and marriages, so we will be granted the power and grace for building lasting memories.

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What's Love Got To Do With It?

JEFFREY O. BROWN

Introduction

“Someone asked me the other day,” wrote Erma Bombeck (2003), America’s much-loved humorist, “if I had my life to live over would I change anything. My answer was no, but then I thought about it and changed my mind. If I had my life to live over again I would have talked less and listened more. Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy and complaining about the shadow over my feet, I’d have cherished every minute of it and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was to be my only chance in life to assist God in a miracle... I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained and the sofa faded... I would have sat cross-legged on the lawn with my children and never worried about grass stains. I would have cried and laughed less while watching television ... and more while watching real life. When my child kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, ‘Later. Now, go get washed up for dinner.’ There would have been more I love yous ...more I’m sorrys ... more I’m listenings ...but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute of it ... look at it and really see it ...try it on ...live it ...exhaust it ...and never give that minute back.”

Oneshotatlfe. What are you doing with your one shot at life? Paul understood that we have one chance to get it right. He recognized that

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life is not about marriage, life is about ministry. He understood that life is not about sex, life is about service. And so he wrote 1 Corinthians 7. This is written from the perspective of time running out, with an unmistakable urgency of the immanent *eschaton*, and under the impending certainty of the *parousia*, the second coming of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7, relationships are not just considered from the perspectives of love and companionship, but how they advance the kingdom of God. There seems to be a force propelling us all into a ship called marriage. And even when we see the name *Titanic* written on the side of the ship, we still can’t wait to jump on board. But there are some significant issues which this passage of Scripture addresses. In the first instance, it speaks to us about *underestimated feelings*.

1. Underestimated Feelings

NOW CONCERNING THE MATTERS ABOUT WHICH YOU WROTE: ‘IT IS GOOD FOR A MAN NOT TO HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH A WOMAN.’ BUT BECAUSE OF THE TEMPTATION TO SEXUAL IMMORALITY, EACH MAN SHOULD HAVE HIS OWN WIFE AND EACH WOMAN HER OWN HUSBAND. 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-2

TO THE UNMARRIED AND THE WIDOWS I SAY THAT IT IS GOOD FOR THEM TO REMAIN SINGLE AS I AM. BUT IF THEY CANNOT EXERCISE SELF-CONTROL, THEY

SHOULD MARRY. FOR IT IS BETTER TO
MARRY THAN TO BURN WITH PASSION.
1 CORINTHIANS 7:8,9

Paul says decisions whether to have sex before marriage and when to have sex in marriage are not based upon how you feel; stop making decisions based upon your emotions and never underestimate the power of feelings. There are feelings that are misplaced and there are feelings that are misinterpreted. *Misplaced* feelings are giving God-ordained passions the wrong assignment. Sexual addiction, pornography and homosexual practice are misplaced feelings. Heterosexual singles struggle against premarital sex and heterosexual marrieds struggle against extramarital sex. Heterosexuals and homosexuals must join in the same struggle to reserve sex until marriage with someone of the opposite sex and then remain in a committed relationship with that one person till death do us part.

So misplaced feelings are giving your God-ordained passions the wrong assignment. *Misinterpreted* feelings are when you let your body rule without checking with your head and it stems from a faulty definition of love. Somebody said love is a feeling you feel when you feel that you're going to get a feeling that you never felt before. That's basing love on feelings. But it's not about feelings, it's about faith. It's not about the heart, it's about the head. It's not about passion, it's about principle. It's not about emotion, it's about devotion. It's not about contentment, it's about commitment. It's not about happiness, it's about holiness. And it's not about Hollywood, it's about the Holy Word.

A young woman told her pastor she was in love. "How do you know?" asked the pastor. "Well, my heart is beating, my brow is perspiring, and my palms are sweaty." "That's not love," exclaimed the pastor. "You've got the flu." Never underestimate the power of feelings. Ellen White (1901) says in Testimonies Vol. 3, page 500: "There are sacrifices to be made for the interests of God's cause. The sacrifice of feeling is the most keen that is required of us; yet after all it is a small sacrifice."

Not only does the passage speak about underestimated feelings, but secondly, it speaks about undiminished faith.

2. Undiminished Faith

I WISH EVERYONE COULD GET ALONG
WITHOUT MARRYING JUST AS I DO.
BUT WE ARE NOT ALL THE SAME. GOD
GIVES SOME THE GIFT OF A HUSBAND
OR WIFE, AND OTHERS HE GIVES THE
GIFT OF BEING ABLE TO STAY HAPPILY
UNMARRIED.
1 CORINTHIANS 7:7 (TLB)

Undiminished faith says that despite what anybody tells you and despite what you may even tell yourself, you have not been left on the shelf by God, you have not been sidelined, you have not been marginalized, you have not been forgotten, you have not been overlooked. You have been given a gift. In fact authors Holly Virden and Michelle Hammond (1972) wrote a book called, *If Singleness is a Gift, What's the Return Policy?* With the eyes of faith, understand that every believer has a gift tailored to their status. Paul says marriage is a gift; and singleness is a gift. Accept your gift by faith because God doesn't give second-rate gifts.

EVERY GOOD GIFT AND EVERY PERFECT
GIFT IS FROM ABOVE, AND COMETH
DOWN FROM THE FATHER OF LIGHTS,
WITH WHOM IS NO VARIABleness,
NEITHER SHADOW OF TURNING.
JAMES 1:17

When does a person receive the gift of marriage? When and while you are married. In the Greek, gifts are called charismata, and charis means grace. How many marrieds know that you need the grace of God to help you make it through your marriage? When does a person receive the gift of singleness? When and while you are single. How many singles know that you need the grace of God to help you make it through your singleness? Gifts of marriage and singleness are given to help you survive and thrive in your status. Understand that these gifts are time-sensitive. That means

two things. Firstly, recognize that having the gift of marriage does not mean that you will always be married; therefore having the gift of singleness does not mean that you will always be single. What it does mean is that while you are married or while you are single, God has given you a gift. Secondly, recognize that, like other gifts such as teaching, leadership and administration, these gifts are developed over time. If you are married, Paul says develop that gift. Commit yourself to marital faithfulness, mutual submission, and mutual respect. If you are single, develop that gift. Commit yourself to sexual purity, wholesome relationships, Christian service, and intellectual development.

Gini Andrews (1972) wrote in her book *Your Half of the Apple*, “Some of the most interesting people I know are single. Often they have developed their minds and skills in a way married people have not had time to do” (p.155). If you are 30 now and God sees that at 35 you will get married, He is asking for you to give Him the best of those remaining five years. Don’t bury your gift. There are so many single people who can’t wait to be married and so many mixed-up married people who can’t wait to be single again. God gave you the best He had. Somebody said, Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to me. John said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Ellen White (1908) said in *Steps to Christ*, p. 20: “In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift.” The word from God’s heart to your heart this morning is, with all the faith you can muster, use the gift you’ve got.

Not only does our passage speak to us about underestimated feelings, and not only does it speak about undiminished faith, but finally it speaks about *undistracted* focus.

3. Undistracted Focus

BUT THIS I SAY, BRETHREN, THE TIME IS SHORT: IT REMAINETH, THAT BOTH THEY THAT HAVE WIVES BE AS THOUGH THEY HAD NONE.
1 CORINTHIANS 7:29

A little boy was found crying because he had lost the note his mother had given him for his schoolteacher explaining why he didn’t have a birth certificate. Wailing aloud, the little boy cried, “I’ve lost my excuse for being born.” What is your purpose for being born? The whole of 1 Corinthians 7 is written with a view to the impending doom the apostle Paul believed would soon come upon the world. He says, “The time left is short.” The Greek word translated ‘short’ or ‘shortened’ literally means to draw together or ‘contract.’ The word was used of furling sails, packing luggage, or reducing expenses. It means we only have time to take on board what is absolutely necessary. We can’t afford to carry excess baggage. “I’ve met a man, he pushes me around a little, well a lot really, and I’ve had a black eye or two, but he says he really loves me and I think I love him, Pastor, what do you think?” Two words: excess baggage. “Well, I’ve met a man I would like to marry, he isn’t a fellow Christian, but he’s better than the men in the church anyway, what do you think, Pastor?” Two words: excess baggage. “Well, I’ve met a man. He’s pretty qualified, but he doesn’t plan to work. He says I make enough for both of us. Should I marry him, Pastor?” Two words: excess baggage.

You see, in the final analysis, the focus of 1 Corinthians 7 is not that you should be married or that you should be single, but that you should be singleminded. Look at verse 35: “I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few things as possible to distract your attention from Him.” Jesus says in Luke 9:62, “Anyone who lets himself be distracted from the work I plan for him is not fit for the Kingdom of God.” Ellen White (1901) says in *Testimonies* Vol. 3, page 500, “No earthly ties, no earthly considerations, should weigh one moment in the scale against duty to the cause and work of God. Jesus severed His connection from everything to save a lost world, and He requires of us a full and entire consecration.”

Our focus is not on pleasing ourselves but on building up the kingdom of God in season and out of season. Some people like to choose their season. I’ve noticed that Jesus is decorated in December, and then jostled in January,

forgotten in February, misplaced in March, absent in April, missed out in May, jolted in June, jilted in July, abandoned in August, shelved in September, omitted in October, neglected in November, and then defrosted... dusted down... and dressed up in December. But God is not looking for seasonal Christians, He's looking for reasonable Christians. Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Your excuse for being born, your task, your assignment, your mission -- should you choose to accept it -- is to find the desperate, the desolate, and the destitute, and point them to Jesus.

Appeal

When I pastored in Toronto, one of my Apple Creek church members had a fine tradition. Married to a Christian from another denomination, she would invite her pastor and family to have lunch with her husband's pastor and family. That's how I met John Moore. In the course of our conversing, I asked him about hobbies or if he had written anything. I knew I had written three books, so I was ready for him. "Oh, I've done a little writing," he said meekly. "What book have you written?" "Oh, I don't write books," he responded. "What do you write, then?" "I write hymns." "Hymns!" I said. "What's the name of one of your hymns?" "Oh, I don't think you've heard of it." "Try me." He said, "Days are filled with sorrow and care, Hearts are lonely and drear; Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near." I was conscious that my mouth was wide open. I knew the hymn very well. I was humbled. I would gladly have exchanged all my books for that one hymn by my new friend, John Moore.

When the single and single-again person comes to you and says they are marginalized traumatized, stigmatized, tell them, "Days are

filled with sorrow and care, Hearts are lonely and drear; Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near." When the married person comes to you and says the romance, the respect, and the love have gone, tell them, "Cast your care on Jesus today, Leave your worry and fear, Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near." When the parent comes to you and tells you that the child of her loins has turned their back on the church of their youth, tell them, "Troubled soul, the Savior can see, Ev'ry heartache and tear, Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near. Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Calvary, Calvary; Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near."

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Leaving a Legacy of Love

ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER

The Text

THEREFORE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS
FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED
TO HIS WIFE, AND THEY SHALL BECOME
ONE FLESH.
GENESIS 2:24

Theme

Marriage is one of the most challenging and rewarding of relationships. If couples are to experience the full joy of oneness God intended, they must fight daily for their marriage. In doing so, they will leave a legacy of love for themselves, their children, their church, and their community.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most challenging and rewarding relationships human beings will ever enter into. Many people today want to believe that if they are “in love” and they have a perfect wedding that’s all that matters. The truth is: Good marriages take work!

Couples getting married always hope their marriage will be happy and will last for a lifetime. However, with today’s divorce rate

of about 50 percent¹, many people wonder if this is a realistic expectation. In reality, all marriages will encounter conflict. Having conflict is not the real problem; how we deal with conflict is going to determine how healthy or disastrous your relationship will be. Furthermore, when couples are experiencing conflict or distress in their relationships, many perceive their relationship is not good enough to survive. This is simply not true: many marriages that end in divorce are “good enough” to be salvaged.²

God, the Creator of marriage, has given us very clear instructions on how to make marriage work. The problem is that many couples are not consulting God’s manual and are willing to give up at the first sign of trouble. It’s like buying a new car and never reading the manual, then when the car has some inevitable mechanical problems, leaving it by the roadside. What a ridiculous thought! Unfortunately, too many marriages end in much the same way.

The good news is that marriages can survive and thrive, but couples will have to fight for their marriage. By God’s grace, couples can learn specific skills that will give them tools to maintain and enhance their oneness, intimacy, communication, and friendship and eliminate barriers that keep them from experiencing the joys of marriage.

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The Dilemma of Modern Marriage

God made humans male and female (Genesis 1:27). In marriage, God joins husband and wife in an inseparable bond. This bond is a higher calling than the parent-child relationship, for a man is to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in a one-flesh relationship (Genesis 2:24). Therefore, what God has joined together people should not separate (Matthew 19: 6b).

In the table below, Balswick and Balswick (2006) share the following summary of the competing sides of traditional marriage, modern marriage, and biblical marriage.

As we examine the traditional and the modern (postmodern) view of marriage, it is clear that neither one is necessarily representative of God’s plan. That is not to say that there are not some positive aspects in those views. However, many people mistakenly push traditional values as biblical values, and they are not the same.

The dilemma in modern marriage is how does a couple become one without compromising individual distinctiveness? Couples today are struggling to balance personal fulfillment with relationship fulfillment—this is a task that must be mastered if marriage is to remain a viable institution in society.

Often, people tout traditional marriage as being the answer to this dilemma, boasting that only 10% of the marriages in our great-grandparents’ days ended in divorce. But a closer glance at this style of marriage will also reveal that the marriages of yesteryear had their fair share of challenges.

Perhaps it is time to change our lens and step back from the rigid traditional view which is more focused on the institution of marriage and from the modern (post-modern) individualistic focus on personal, and move towards a biblical understanding of covenant commitment and mutual responsibility.

God intended for marriage to be a place where both people experience trust, safety, and oneness. If two people are to become one, there has to be a mutuality that seeks that good of the relationship and not just the needs of the individual. When we base our marriage on a biblical foundation and live by God-designed principles, we will find fulfillment and satisfaction in the marriage relationship.

“AT THE VERY HEART OF MARRIAGE IS THE WILLINGNESS OF SPOUSES TO LET GO OF THEIR PERSONAL AGENDA SO THAT THEY CAN TRULY LISTEN TO WHAT THEIR PARTNER IS SAYING.” (JACK O. BALSWICK & BALSWICK, 2014, P. 93)

Traditional	Biblical	Modern
Commitment (to the institution)	Covenant (between husband and wife)	Contract (self-fulfilment)
Coercive	Cohesive	Disengaged
Dutiful Sex	Affectionate Sex (mutual pleasure)	Self-Centered Sex (personal pleasure)
Rigid	Adapatable/Flexible	Chaotic (no rules)
Male-Centered	Relationship-Centered	Self-Centered
Communication Style (pronouncement)	Discussion (negotiation)	Demand (stalemate)

God's Plan For Marriage

The Bible presents the true picture of how human relationships should look. Human beings are created by a relational Triune God—The Trinity, God, being one, yet composed of three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Jack O. Balswick & Balswick, 2014). First, our relational God created us to be in relationship with Him; then He created us to be in significant and fulfilling relationships with others. Hence, our relationships are to reflect the relationality within the Holy Trinity. In essence, God intends for all our relationships to be a reflection of Him!

Of course, God is perfect and as human beings we are not perfect. Hence, we must acknowledge our weakness and humbly seek God's guidance for grace and strength to reflect His glory to our spouse.

In the old and new testaments we find four basic elements that are essential to healthy relationships and will help us leave a legacy of love. These elements are covenant, grace, empowering, and intimacy.

Covenant: In the Bible, covenant is a word used to describe marriage, the most serious and compelling agreement known in the Scriptures (**Malachi 2:14; Proverbs 2:16, 17**). It is God's intent that the relationship between husband and wife be modeled after His endless covenant with His people.

Contrary to popular belief, marriage is not a 50/50 proposition. The covenant relationship in marriage is a 100/100 proposition. It is based on unconditional commitment to an individual based on our decision to love them, and not on that individual's response to our love. Paul, the apostle, in *1 Corinthians 13:5* states categorically, *"Love keeps no record of wrongs."*

In marriage, God gives us opportunities to understand His love for us and the plan of salvation. And it is especially a part of God's plan for the marriage relationship to develop into an unconditional two-way commitment.

Grace: God wants us to understand that grace is about forgiving and being forgiven—(**Matthew 6:15**). Marriage as designed by God is to be lived out in an atmosphere of grace, not law. Marriage based upon contract, leads to an atmosphere of law, while marriage based on covenant leads to an atmosphere of grace and forgiveness. In an atmosphere of grace, family members act responsibly out of love and consideration for one another. In a family based on law, perfection will be demanded of each other. This approach to relating adds guilt to the failure that is inevitable because of our fallen and broken human condition (**Romans 3:23-24**). Let's face the reality of life; we are all going to make mistakes in our relationships. There is no humanly possible way of getting around this fact, though many may be in denial of its existence.

Unfortunately, because of the legalism that often accompanies a fundamentalist approach to faith and religion, despite the grace-filled life of Jesus Christ and the message found in the parables He shared, we often fail to offer grace to one another in relationships.

Too often Christians experience emotional problems because of our lack of understanding of God's unconditional love and grace. If we do not understand this then, it is difficult or impossible for us to share His unconditional love, grace and forgiveness with others.

Ellen White says, "Love imparts to its possessor grace, propriety, and comeliness of deportment. It illuminates the countenance and subdues the voice; it refines and elevates the entire being" (White, 1948, p. 123). We offer grace and forgiveness to those we have decided to love and have determined to be in relationship with, because tomorrow we are the ones that will need to be the recipients of that grace.

Empowering: God wants us to know, definitively, that life is about service. That is, serving one another. Empowering is a biblical concept for the use of power, which without exception, is contrary to the common use of power in our families and this capitalistic

society of ours. It is an active, intentional process of enabling another person to acquire power. The person who is empowered has gained power because of the encouraging behavior of the other (**1 Corinthians 13:4-6**).

Empowerment is the process of helping another person recognize their strengths and potentials within, as well as encouraging and guiding the development of these qualities. When we empower people, we in turn are empowered, and our relationship is enhanced.

Empowerment is love in action. It is this characteristic of Jesus Christ that our family members must emulate most. If we can practice empowerment in our families, it will revolutionize the view of authority in Christian homes. Coercion and manipulation are the opposite of empowerment—it is a distortion of what real power is. Empowerment is about mutuality and unity.

Intimacy: Intimacy is, knowing someone and being known by that person in a covenant relationship. Human beings have the capacity, given them by God, to know each other intimately. The intimacy that Adam and Eve felt was an ability to be themselves without any pretense. They had no need to play deceptive games with one another, because they had respect for one another and didn't abuse one another (**Genesis 2:25**).

Shame, to be sure, is born out of fear of being known intimately. When shame is present, family members put on masks and begin to play deceptive roles for each other. By contrast, as we examine how Genesis describes the nature of the human family before the fall, we find an emphasis on intimacy--on the knowing of the other.

Many people are afraid to enter into relationships for the fear of being rejected by another. Thus, one who is afraid of rejection does not allow himself to be intimately known by another person. Never sharing their true feelings, there is no basis for a real relationship, and they grope in relationship darkness--hampered, handicapped, and hindered, by their lack of self-disclosure.

Couples who base their marriage on covenant love, grace and empowering one another, know each other deeply and intimately.

The unconditional love modeled by Jesus gives us a picture of the type of communicative intimacy desirable in marriage and other significant relationships. Forgiving and being forgiven will be an important part of renewal. There will be a need to confess as well as to receive confession. Where there is real intimacy, there is no need to be ashamed to admit failure or ask for forgiveness. In fact, it is only when we take the steps to understand what Jesus did for us and continues to do for us each day that we can get to the point of being able to achieve intimacy with another individual, and find satisfaction in the relationship.

Barriers to Oneness

In the book, *A Lasting Promise*, (Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 2013) Scott Stanley and others share some barriers that keep marriages and other relationships from reaching their full potential and experiencing the blessings God intended for us.

Self-Protection and the fear of rejection—

After Adam and Even sinned they immediately covered themselves. Then they hid from each other, and they hid from God. They became aware of their differences, and feared they would be rejected by one another and by God. Oneness will not happen in an environment of fear and lack of acceptance.

Sin and selfishness—“*The fact is, a marriage brings together two imperfectly motivated people who strongly--and somewhat selfishly--desire intimacy and the other good things of life, but who fear being hurt*”. (p. 21) Both the traditional and the post-modern view discussed earlier will lead to sin and selfishness. Oneness in marriage only thrives when each individual is focused on serving the other person—it is other-centered not self-centered.

Lack of Knowledge—The ability to quote scripture doesn't automatically mean you know what to do to thrive in marriage. For example: do

you know how to listen to your mate, when you disagree, or you are in a heated debate? Do you know how to stop an argument before damaging things are said? Do you know how deepen commitment, problem solve as a team, work through the process of forgiving one another? Anyone can learn how to do these things.

Building a Strong Marriage

A good beginning in marriage does not guarantee a successful marriage. Couples must be committed to applying God's word to marriage every day. Make the following commitments today suggested by Stanley and team in the CPREP Program³:

- Commit to tearing down barriers in your marriage and keeping them down. *Serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13.*
- Commit to focusing on what you can do to be a better spouse. *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. James 1:19.*
- Commit to loving your spouse like God loves. *Love is patient; love is kind... it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7.*

Exercise

Engage the group or each couple in a 15-minute discussion with the following questions:

1. How does the traditional and modern views of marriage compare to the biblical view of marriage?
2. What does it mean to be in a "good enough" marriage? How can a couple go from "good enough" to "great"?
3. What other relational scriptures can you think about that will enhance your marriage or other relationships? Choose two or three, write them down, and commit to using them in your relationships everyday.

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Notes

- ¹ Vespa, J. et al (2013). pp. 20-570. *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012. Population characteristics*. US Census Bureau. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf>

The American divorce rate today is about twice that of 1960, but has declined since hitting its highest point in our history in the early 1980s. For the average couple marrying for the first time in recent years, the lifetime probability of divorce or separation now falls between 40 and 50 percent.

Adventist Families in North American. Center for Creative Ministry and North American Division Family Ministries (2010). Retrieved from www.creativeministry.org

More than one in four Adventist Church members in North America has gone through a divorce. Those over 45 years of age are more likely to have done so, as those from households with incomes under \$25,000 a year, those who are native-born and those who report their ethnicity as African American.

- ² Most Marriages and Divorces Are Low Conflict. Retrieved from <http://www.divorcesource.com/ds/considering/most-marriages-and-divorces-are-low-conflict-483.shtml>
- ³ CPREP: Christian Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program. <https://www.prepinc.com>

Growing In Love

ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER

The Text

NOW MAY OUR GOD AND FATHER
HIMSELF, AND OUR LORD JESUS, DIRECT
OUR WAY TO YOU, AND MAY THE LORD
MAKE YOU INCREASE AND ABOUND IN
LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER AND FOR ALL,
AS WE DO FOR YOU, SO THAT HE MAY
ESTABLISH YOUR HEARTS BLAMELESS
IN HOLINESS BEFORE OUR GOD AND
FATHER, AT THE COMING OF OUR LORD
JESUS WITH ALL HIS SAINTS.
1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13: (ESV)

Introduction

On a recent trip to Cape Town, South Africa, we were filled with joy and humility when introduced to Siphon and Thandiwe during a speaking appointment at one of the churches in the area. This husband and wife duo had attended one of our seminars on an earlier visit. With plans in hand to divorce, Siphon and Thandiwe participated in our seminar out of curiosity. They had also promised friends they would come, so they were present.

Our seminar on that occasion was about developing healthier marriage relationships. Impacted by what they heard, Siphon and

Thandiwe determined to use the information we provided to work on having a healthier and more meaningful marriage. What a joy it was to meet this amazing couple whose marriage had made an about face because of what we shared with them a couple of years before.

Today, many of us are in difficult and stressed relationships with our fathers, mothers, children, spouses, neighbors, friends, church members, pastors, aunts, uncles, grandparents or grandchildren. It is Satan's plan to bring strife, stress, tension and trauma in our relationships. Nevertheless, God wants to give us peace, joy, and contentment in our relationships so we can exude His love to the world and make memories that will keep us hopeful for the future until Jesus comes again.

First Thessalonians came to the church at Thessalonica from three authors—Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1:1, see also 2 Thessalonians 1:1). Paul was clearly the primary author of the letter (2:18; 3:5; 5:27), but he was happy to share the credit with his ministry colleagues.

Silvanus—called Silas in the book of Acts—was a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22), a prophet (Acts 15:32), and a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37–38). He became Paul's traveling companion after Paul's separation from Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41). While in Philippi, they suffered a beating and

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imprisonment together shortly before their arrival in Thessalonica. On the other hand, Timothy was a younger man Paul met on his first missionary journey, and immediately joined Paul in ministry (Acts 16:1–3), helping Paul and Silas establish the church at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9).

The historical context of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is described in Acts 17 and 18 and hinted at in the letters as well. After a painful experience in Philippi (Acts 16:12–40; 1 Thessalonians 2:2), Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy) moved on to the city of Thessalonica, which had a Jewish synagogue (Acts 17:1). In Thessalonica Paul preached from the Scriptures that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer first and then rise from the dead. He also attempted to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of what the Messiah was supposed to be like (Acts 17:2–3). In the process of Paul's preaching, many Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 17:4), but rioting broke out (Acts 17:5–6) and the city authorities intervened (Acts 17:8–9), prompting Paul and Silas—and presumably Timothy—to leave the city in a hurry (Acts 17:10).

After further trouble in Berea, Paul travelled to Athens and sent for Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:14–15). Soon after this, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to visit the believers there and check on their spiritual progress (1 Thessalonians 3:1–2). Silas also went back to Macedonia (Acts 18:5), ostensibly to visit the young church in Philippi and encourage the believers. After Paul left Athens, he traveled to Corinth (Acts 18:1) where he was rejoined by Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5). It was during this time in Corinth that Paul and his companions wrote 1 Thessalonians.

In Paul's day Greece was divided into two Roman provinces. The northern province that included Thessalonica and Philippi was called Macedonia. The southern province, which included Athens and Corinth, was called Achaia. Both provinces are also mentioned in this letter, as well as in Acts 19:21, Romans 15:26, and in 2 Corinthians 9:2 and 11:9–10. Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia,

with a port on the Aegean Sea and a major highway—the Egnatian Way—leading to the Adriatic Sea and on to Rome.

The first letter to Thessalonica was likely written from Corinth, as mentioned above, since Paul seemed to be aware of what the people in Achaia were thinking, the province where Corinth was located (1 Thessalonians 1:7–8). The first letter to the Thessalonians was written around A.D. 50 to 51, a short time after Paul's original visit to the city (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

It is natural for new believers to face serious challenges in the early weeks following their conversion. Paul was aware of this reality and being unable to be with them during this time, he sent Timothy to check on the spiritual stability of the believers. Once Paul received a report of the faithfulness of the new believers and also about some challenges they were facing; he responded to their questions and experiences with the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians.

The Thessalonian church was suffering from behavior issues due in part to confused ideas about the return of Jesus and the events that would surround His return. So the primary focus of 1 Thessalonians is on the last days of earth's history. In fact, every chapter of the letter concludes with a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus (1:9–10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:23–24).

It is very possible the Thessalonians misunderstood Paul's teaching, assuming they would all still be alive until Jesus returned. They seemed to understand that believers who died would be seriously disadvantaged in some way at Jesus' return (4:13–15). However, Paul assures the Thessalonian believers in his letter that the righteous dead will be resurrected first to fully participate with those who are alive (4:15–17). He also makes clear that Jesus' coming will not be secretive (4:16) and that all the redeemed will meet Him in the air (4:17).

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, Paul turns his focus to readiness for the Second Coming.

While the timing of Jesus' return will be a surprise (5:2–3), Paul teaches that believers will be prepared for this event by spiritual alertness and self-discipline (5:4–8), fueled by hope and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (5:8–10). By having accurate knowledge of what will happen in the time of the end, the believers find encouragement to deal with the challenges of the present (4:18; 5:11).

Since the Thessalonian church was holding firm in its decision for Christ, Paul also focused on the struggles they were having in living out their faith. Contemporary Roman society had little sexual restraint, much like the realities of today. In contrast, Paul carefully teaches these believers that sex outside of marriage damages the individuals involved, as well as others who are being influenced by them (4:3–6).

It would also appear that some of the Thessalonians had stopped working (4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–7, 11), were living off others (2 Thessalonians 3:6–7), and had become disruptive and undisciplined (1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–7, 11), losing the respect of even their Gentile neighbors. Paul responds by emphasizing that Christians should mind their own business (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12) and support themselves as they await the return of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 3:6–9).

The Application

Taking our cues from the apostle Paul, we note that the Bible is a text for human relationships. One example of this notion is how relational directives are commands intended to create a basic framework for living in relationship with fellow human beings: for example, Matthew 7:12: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them... (the golden rule).” Matthew 22:39 “love your neighbor as yourself.” Luke 6:27: “love your enemies.” Romans 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Ephesians 5:21: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

There are specific relational directives for families:

Marriage – Proverbs 5:18: “rejoice in the wife of your youth.” Ephesians 5:22, 25: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church.”

Parents – Ephesians 6:4: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Children – Proverbs 4:1: “Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight.” Colossians 3:20: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”

At least three of the commandments are intended to protect, preserve and enhance life in the family, society and church: Exodus 20:12: “Honor your father and your mother...” Exodus 20:14: “You shall not commit adultery.” Exodus 20:17: “you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...”

As we prepare for the coming of the Lord, we should be mindful of *growing in love*, so that we may make memories that strengthen each of our relationships to help hasten the day of the Lord.

In December 2013 we were in Athens, Greece to conduct leadership training in Family Ministries for the Trans-European Division. There were leaders from England, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, and perhaps a couple other countries. In the middle of the week the Division Directors had arranged an outing to Corinth, one of the cities where the apostle Paul lived and ministered.

Corinth was a city-state on the Isthmus of Corinth, the narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland in Greece, roughly halfway between Athens and Sparta and about 48 miles southwest of Athens. On our chartered bus it took about an hour to get there. Just before leaving Athens, Pastor Apostolos Maglis, President of the Greek Mission, gave each participant a copy of a chapter from the book *Come Over Into Macedonia and Help Us*, written by Katerina Erevnidou, a Greek Adventist scholar

who chronicled the apostle Paul's ministry in Greece and especially in Corinth.

By the time we arrived in Corinth, we had read the chapter and received an education on the reason the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 had been written to the Corinthians.

Corinth was a wealthy city because of its commerce, its location on the Isthmus and its two harbors. The Phoenicians, being the most famous naval and commercial people of antiquity, had an agency of commerce and navigation in Corinth; so Corinth became the center of important handicrafts. The transport of ships and goods from one seaport to the other brought many sailors who spent quite a bit of time in Corinth. And since international seaports are especially known for their corruption, Corinth—an international seaport—was also known for its corruption.

The main divinity of the ancient world worshipped in Corinth was Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love. A great part of her adoration was based on prostitution. So rich was the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth that it had as priestesses over a thousand prostitutes consecrated to the worship of the goddess by both men and women. Naturally, the presence of these women attracted great numbers of men and especially wealthy travelers, merchants and ship owners, contributing to the enrichment of the city, and to the financial ruin of many of these travelers delivered to voluptuousness. Indeed, from the root word “Corinth” derived the verb “corinthiazein” which means to live in luxury and debauchery. Thus was the Corinth of Paul's day. In this context, the apostle Paul under inspiration directs the Corinthian believers to a true understanding of love.

The heart of the love message is in vv. 4-8 of 1 Corinthians 13: (4) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boasts; it is not arrogant (5) or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; (6) it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. (7) Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (8) Love never ends....

We must be *growing in love*, to make the kind of memories that will help us remain disciples of Jesus Christ. It must be a life of intentionally invoking the power of God in our lives each day, to be more and more like Jesus, patient and kind and forgiving.

When we compare ourselves to the ideals of God's Word, we also utter in desperation and shame what the apostle Paul states in Romans 7:15-24:

FOR I DO NOT UNDERSTAND MY OWN ACTIONS. FOR I DO NOT DO WHAT I WANT, BUT I DO THE VERY THING I HATE. NOW IF I DO WHAT I DO NOT WANT, I AGREE WITH THE LAW, THAT IT IS GOOD. SO NOW IT IS NO LONGER I WHO DO IT, BUT SIN THAT DWELLS WITHIN ME. FOR I KNOW THAT NOTHING GOOD DWELLS IN ME, THAT IS, IN MY FLESH. FOR I HAVE THE DESIRE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT, BUT NOT THE ABILITY TO CARRY IT OUT. FOR I DO NOT DO THE GOOD I WANT, BUT THE EVIL I DO NOT WANT IS WHAT I KEEP ON DOING. NOW IF I DO WHAT I DO NOT I DO NOT WANT, IT IS NO LONGER I WHO DO IT, BUT SIN THAT DWELLS WITHIN ME. SO I FIND IT TO BE A LAW THAT WHEN I WANT TO DO RIGHT, EVIL LIES CLOSE AT HAND. FOR I DELIGHT IN THE LAW OF GOD, IN MY INNER BEING, BUT I SEE IN MY MEMBERS ANOTHER LAW WAGING WAR AGAINST THE LAW OF MY MIND AND MAKING ME CAPTIVE TO THE LAW OF SIN THAT DWELLS IN MY MEMBERS. WRETCHED MAN THAT I AM! WHO WILL DELIVER ME FROM THIS BODY OF DEATH? THANKS BE TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD!...

Today we remind you that to remain the people of God we must, by definition, be *growing in love* each day. We know this is possible as the apostle Paul writes his letter to the Philippians in chapter 4:13: I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Conclusion

Every Sabbath morning I (Willie) receive a group text from Bill Knott, the editor of the

Adventist Review/Adventist World, whose office is not far from ours. The text Bill sent several months ago lies at the heart of the matter if we are going to be *growing in love*. It reads: “Dear Brother in Christ: Funny, isn’t it, how all our measures of success are changed when grace inhabits us? We move others to the front; we treasure silence; we forgive often; we criticize infrequently. We lay down the gavel and the rod. We pick up—happily—the basin and the towel. Grace tells us we need nothing more than Jesus, and it assures us that we will one day celebrate among that great unnumbered throng who care not a whit whether they sing better than their fellows.”

As we live our lives on this earth until Jesus comes—and He is coming soon—we must continue to be *growing in love*. To be sure, we can’t do so on our own. We will falter like the Thessalonians or the Corinthians who did not listen to Paul and did not avail themselves of the power of God.

In the context of *growing in love*, Ellen White shares in *The Ministry of Healing* p. 486: “if impatient words are spoken to you, never reply in the same spirit.”

To be *growing in love* we must remember to grow in Christ each day. To grow in Christ each day we must always remember, He promised to ‘be with us always’ (Matthew 28:20), ‘give

us His peace’ (John 14:27) and ‘supply all our needs’ (Philippians 4:13).

When we met Sipho and Tandhiwe in South Africa, they looked happy. They looked connected. They could have been confused for a couple on their honeymoon. The spark was back; the love was obvious. They had made up their minds that their lives together needed to be about *growing in love* and making memories that would keep their marriage healthy and strong.

Let’s trust and rely on God each day so that there will be peace in all of our relationships, we will daily make good memories, and we will be ready for the coming of the Lord.

May God bless us to this end is our prayer.

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How You Say It

ELAINE AND WILLIE OLIVER

Q - My husband and I don't have a very good marriage. The first few months after our wedding we had a lot of fun and got along quite well. Since then, things have gone south. We seem to disagree with each other in every conversation, and since the children arrived—we have two boys—it has just added to the stress in our marriage, and our lack of peaceful conversations with each other. If things don't get better between us soon, I may not be able to stay in this marriage much longer. Please help! We can't talk to each other anymore.

Michelle—Addison, Texas

A - Effective communication is essential to the survival of every marriage. If we were to look at marriage as a living organism, good communication would be like healthy blood running through every cell in the system to remain viable. And if marriage were a car engine, good communication would be like oil with enough viscosity to keep the parts well lubricated in order to function well.

One of the greatest challenges in married life—once the honeymoon is over—is for couples to engage in frequent conversation that is calm, civil, constructive, affirming,

peaceful, and understanding. It is a delusion to believe getting along well before marriage means you will continue to do so after marriage. It is amazing how much stress, tension, and trouble a few dishes that need washing, bills that need paying, floors that need sweeping, and babies that need feeding can bring to an otherwise wonderful and blissful marriage.

Good communication is not a skill we often bring to marriage. Most of us came up in families in which voices were raised—sometimes more than just a little—when people disagreed with each other. This unfortunate legacy must be discarded to survive the rigors of real life in marriage.

There are two elements that are particularly important to having good communication in marriage, or any other meaningful relationship: making it clear and making it safe.

Quite frequently lack of clarity causes miscommunication in marriage. Many of the most heated arguments take place because a husband or wife failed to understand what his or her spouse meant to say, making things very unclear and leaving spouses very angry at each other.

Having a great marriage means that both husband and wife should be able to express their feelings, beliefs, concerns, and

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preferences clearly without damaging the relationship in the process. For this to happen, each spouse must feel safe to share what is on his or her mind, which can be accomplished only in an environment in which each spouse is careful about not hurting the feelings of the other.

To accomplish these two important concepts that are essential to great communication, there should be an agreement to: 1. Listen first and talk second. 2. Resist the urge to defend yourself. 3. Paraphrase what your spouse is saying to make sure you understand each other and are on the same page. 4. Share the process so you both have an opportunity to listen and speak to each other. 5. Pray for patience, a

willing heart to resolve your differences to satisfaction, and a desire to give honor and glory to God in the process.

The Bible states in Proverbs 25:11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” Determine that every time you speak to your spouse it will be like giving him a gift of gold and silver, so your conversation with each other will find new joy and peace, and be a blessing to your children and their children

Reference

Keith E. Whitfield et al., *Fighting for Your African American Marriage* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), p. 49.