

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD, FROM THIS DAY FORWARD A LOOK AT CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

In the beginning...

There is likely no period of greater deception in any relationship than courtship. Marriage is the union of two people who arrive toting the luggage of their past life. The luggage always contains sin. We must not ignore our sin, because it is the very context in which the gospel shines brightest. Sometimes the luggage gets opened on the honeymoon, often it waits until later but it is always there, popping open unexpectedly and spilling out forgotten contents. The past finds its way back to the rightful owner. In some cases these unbidden intruders never leave, never get addressed, and sap the energy and life out of the marriage. Differences at first attract, and then they divide. The differences that at first were full of mystery and intrigue often come to be regarded with contempt.

God's blueprint for marriage...

We need to know God's goal for marriage, and how we can get there. How we live our life, and thus how we build our marriage reflects our theological belief system to the outside world. Our theology governs how we think, what we say, and how we act in all aspects of our life, including our marriage. What we believe about God determines the quality of our marriage. To become a good theologian and to be able to look forward to a lifelong, thriving marriage, we must have a clear understanding of the gospel. Without it, we cannot see God, ourselves, or our marriage for what they truly are.

In Genesis 2:24, God gives us his blueprint for marriage: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." A husband and wife are to leave their mother and their father—and by implication all other loyalties—in order to create space for a new trust to grow without the entanglement of old loyalties. It is the first command for marriage, and when it is violated or ignored, a marriage is doomed to be less than it was meant to be. We must put a boundary between ourselves and the people, customs, influences and baggage that once defined who we are. It is a calling to a new beginning. Couples are called to cocoon for a time to establish their own order and ethos. A marriage is meant to be a strong, permeable but highly resistant barrier between itself and the world. It is through the medium of words that intimacy grows and the couple is united. In marriage, the two become one flesh, righteously before God, through sexual intercourse.

The love that builds a marriage is the kind of love God has for us. It is called "agape"—love that seeks the welfare of the other. It is love that has nothing to do with how someone is gratifying us at the moment. It has to do with what is good for the other. In short, agape is concerned with the good of the other person.

Let's consider some ways we can move toward agape love with our spouse.

•*Remove the log from your own eye...*

We often want to fix our marriage problems by “fixing” our spouses. That is not the place to begin. Scripture does not give us permission to make the sins of our spouse our first priority. We need to slow down, exercise the humility of self-suspicion, and inspect our own heart first. “How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (Matthew 7:3)

Let’s say that you and your spouse have recently had a conflict to which both of you contributed. What would happen if you evaluated the conflict in light of this passage, and your spouse did too? It is nothing more than basic integrity to consider our own issues before we consider the issues of our spouse.

•*Make the choice to move toward intimacy...*

In every interchange between a husband and wife, especially when there is tension, conflict, and disagreement, there is the possibility of division. The goal of marriage is intimacy, union, and oneness. At every moment a couple is moving either toward intimacy or away from it. We all tend to deny our sin, while pointing out the sin of our spouse. But it’s the sin in our hearts that cause the issues. Many marriage problems could move toward resolution if husband and wife actually lived as if they were “sinners” who have said, “I do.” In doing so, they are discovering what’s really going on—that the ability to claim righteousness apart from Christ undermines the truth of his message.

•*Practice forgiveness...*

The fact that we will sin against each other is inevitable. The result of any failure will be hurt and division. It is crucial for us to grapple with the one sure need of every marriage: forgiveness. Forgiveness and repentance are powerful tools that can repair the damage done to sin-torn marriage relationships. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18, that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. It is reconciliation between a sinner and God, and between a sinner and the one(s) sinned against, between a husband and a wife. The process of asking and giving forgiveness has to do with speech—or how we dialogue when we are hurt. Therefore, the charge to join together also has to do with how we communicate, especially in moments of conflict that will likely require one or both to seek forgiveness. Good conversation is open-ended and curious. It is not a debate, nor is it mere information giving. Dialogue is a conversation that weaves the strands of one with another. It names what is obvious, refuses to hide, and is open to new views in order to better see what is true. However, the goal for a conversation is not simply to smooth things over. It is to care for our soul mate and ultimately to connect him or her to God. A virtuous spouse seeking to help the other will make that relationship with God the first priority.

•*Make time for your marriage...*

Marriage requires ongoing time and attention. Daily care need not require hours, though it may in certain seasons. Daily care involves checking in with each other. It calls us to hear and speak in ways that keep our promise to cherish. It certainly means to pray together and for each other. The Bible tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26). The sundown challenge is not merely a command to kiss and make up. It is a warning to us to be careful to keep from dwelling on our anger, which in turn is likely to lead us to sin. It is a strong command to see one day, one single day, as the only day that is left. Perhaps you've considered the question "What would you do if this were the last day of your life?" Would you spend it bickering or escaping to a separate part of the house? Do you have a set-aside time to catch up on the day? Do you make time to pray together? Do you take a daily walk? If you don't have a few daily routines that are solidifying for your marriage, your relationship will not be all that God designed it to be.

•*Show mercy to your spouse...*

Do you see your spouse as God sees him or her—through eyes of mercy? Mercy sweetens marriage. Where it is absent, two people flog one another over everything from failure to fix the faucet to phone bills. But where mercy is present, marriage is more delightful, even in the face of challenges, setbacks, and the persistent effects of our remaining sin. Mercy sweetens the bitterness out of relationships – especially marriage. Without mercy, differences become divisive, sometimes even "irreconcilable." But deep, profound differences are the reality of every marriage. It's not the presence of differences but the absence of mercy that makes them irreconcilable. Mercy is to be received, enjoyed, celebrated, and then it must be passed along. God offered mercy to us so that we might share it. Mercy doesn't change the need to speak truth, however, it does transform our motivation from a desire to win battles to a desire to represent Christ. It takes us out of the center and puts Christ in the center.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Scripture assumes we each have weaknesses, and Christ is aware of and extends mercy toward every single one. He can relate to our struggles and calls us to do the same for our spouses. We need to be willing to experience sin against us as part of building a God-glorifying marriage in a fallen world. Grace, laced with mercy, says to our spouse, "I know you are a sinner like me and you will sin against me, just like I sin against you. But I refuse to live defensively with you. I'm going to live, leaning in your direction, with a merciful posture that your sin and weakness cannot erase."

We need to remind ourselves that our greatest enemy is our own sin. Ask each other, when not in conflict, "What behavior of mine expresses anger or a lack of love for you?" Take your spouse's answer and try doing the opposite when you feel sinned against. Learn to love in the style of 1 Corinthians 13 by being "patient, kind, and not resentful." Apply this verse in the heat of conflict: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce

the righteousness that God requires” (James 1:19-20). Draw in the outside counsel of friends, pastors, counselors, etc. who can help identify where chronic problems are occurring and provide accountability for responses of love. Use how you want to be treated as the measure for how you treat your spouse. If you can avert a two-hour argument with two minutes of mercy, that’s a win for everyone involved!

How to build trust with your spouse...

The value of trust in a marriage is immeasurable. The result of an absence of trust is highly calculable: division. A marriage without trust is an empty well—it promises satisfaction but it never delivers. The byproduct is obvious—the more mistrust, the greater the potential for division. We must never presume that a marriage has either enough trust or enough love. Both are to grow over a lifetime, but love can’t flourish in its playful, free and tender offering unless trust is solid and sure. Trust is earned, and earned the hard way—day to day, in the small matters, through intentional movements of truth-loving deeds. Honesty is essential in marriage and we must be able to build trust and resolve offenses.

Signs of trouble...

Our marriage is only as good as the investment we make in it. God has constructed life so that we are always either going forward into the growth process or backing away from it. We can’t stay the same. The connection either deepens, opening both spouses up to the hearts of the other, or it starts to deteriorate, closing them off from each other. In hindsight, many couples will say, “We now see the signs we missed before.” These signs generally have to do with things such as: increasing withdrawal of need, unresolved differences the couple simply walks away from in resignation, turning to others for needs that the marriage used to meet, or interests and relationships that are not talked about with the spouse. It is important to avoid the tendency to ignore the problem and hope it goes away. Do not mistake a lack of crisis as a sign that the marriage is healthy.

Food for thought...

At Fairfax.cc our prayer for you is that God will be in the center of your marriage. When this happens, the marriage relationship will encourage you both as you mature in your walk with Christ and grow even closer as a couple. Remember that your spouse is the only person whom you have covenanted to love until death do us part. True love is neither physical, nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be.

“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 self-seeking, 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.”

1 Corinthians 13: 4-8

Recommended reading...

When Sinners Say "I Do" – Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage

By: Dave Harvey

The Intimate Mystery – Creating Strength and Beauty in Your Marriage

Boundaries In Marriage – Understanding the Choices that Make or Break Loving Relationships By: Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

The Marriage Builder – A Blueprint for Couples & Counselors

By: Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr.

Love & Respect – The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs

By: Dr. Emerson Eggerichs

Simple Secrets of a Great Marriage

By: Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

Rescue Your Love Life: Changing the 8 Dumb Attitudes & Behaviors That Will Sink Your Marriage By: Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy By: Gary Thomas