

IN LOVE FOR LIFE



BUILDING OR REBUILDING A GREAT MARRIAGE

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1. THE LOVE CONNECTION

There used to be a show on television called "*The Love Connection*." People would come on the program to question several prospective partners and then choose one for a date. After their evening out they would come back and tell the host and audience how their date went. This is where the fun began as each described their evening out and how they got along with the person they had chosen. There were some who naturally hit it off but the majority of the dates were filled with funny and, at times, embarrassing moments.

Nowadays we have programs like "*The Bachelorette*" that play on the same theme, and any number of websites that promise to find not only a suitable partner, but a true "soul mate."

These services try to match individuals according to looks, activities, needs and character since people usually seek a partner who looks and acts like they want and has like needs. However, good looks, similar activities and a suitable character do not always lead to love nor are they the same as love.

The title of this book is, "*In Love for Life*." The point I want to make with this book is that if God created marriage to last a lifetime, then He has also given us the ability to love each other for that long as well. The following chapters explore how to keep that love going for a lifetime.

THE ROMANTIC MYTH

Sexual attraction has been around since Adam and Eve but not the westernized idea of "romance" popularized by books and movies in our

Western culture. (i.e. Mr. Right comes along and sweeps you off your feet, or there's only one person in the world just for you).

Until the Middle Ages marriages were organized by families and strictly supervised. This was a universal custom.

This began to change in the 16th and 17th centuries as French songwriters produced ballads that introduced highly romantic ideas about love (e.g. Love at first sight) in order to entertain French lords and ladies at the royal court. This was a departure from the customary way of contracting marriages based on ability to provide, family background, and agreement on political, social, and religious beliefs. There were still impulsive elopements and adultery, but these were the exceptions. Arranged marriages were the way things were done and it worked!

The heroes of these stories and songs were always brave, beautiful, and chivalrous. Common people were not thought capable of the same kind of emotions so "love stories" were always a monopoly of the aristocracy. The culture of romance was for the rich until the French Revolution. When the nobility in France fell, the stories remained and were passed on to the masses and spread throughout Europe.

Until that time, "falling in love," with all the emotional stress and strain was considered an unfortunate experience. It was preferred that one's marriage be based on careful selection and approval by both families. Everyone wanted this, even the individuals.

The introduction of "romance" as an art form made it, at first, an acceptable experience alongside the traditional marriage arrangement procedure, but eventually became the preferred way to go about getting married. Today, arranged marriages are seen as unnatural and rejected by most Western societies.

The point I want to make here is that the success of a marriage does not depend solely on how carefully you "arrange" it or how "romantic" or "infatuated" the couple is. For centuries arranged marriages succeeded in producing lifetime unions that were satisfying and productive. For the last several centuries, however, marriages that began with a simple romantic urge have also been able to produce long and successful unions.

In the end, marriages that work are the ones that base their relationships on love (not compatibility or romance).

ROMANCE VS. LOVE

I want to make a distinction between romance and love. Every marriage needs romance (a spark, a sparkle) but it cannot survive on just this one ingredient. Knowing the difference between the two can be very helpful in building a successful relationship.

ROMANCE

1. Romance produces the wrong expectations.

Previously, in older or Eastern cultures, young people were preparing themselves for conjugal living with such things as collecting a dowry, obtaining an education, building a home, and developing work or child rearing skills. The marriage relationship was allowed to grow within the context of a home and shared commitment to family, land, etc. The love was the product of the life together.

Today we prepare for marriage by looking for (and usually idealizing) the perfect mate for ourselves. People focus on their own image and then look for a matching image. After they have found Mr. or Ms. "Right," they marry and begin to learn how to live the conjugal life. We do it backwards: fall in love, then learn how to live together. In the past, couples married and lived together, then fell in love.

History shows that one method began with very little emotional investment and grew with knowledge and practice, whereas the modern method begins with total emotional investment, high expectations and then must adapt to a lesser reality.

2. Romance emphasizes the wrong things.

Romance looks for the immediate spark or the fire and if not present will often reject a potential partner who is spiritually, emotionally, and socially suitable. Romance's courtship is based mostly on the pursuit of physical intimacy, ignoring the more important elements of human relationships. Romance searches for a partner that feels good and looks

good but ignores issues of character, adaptability, and comfort, which make long-term relationships possible. In the long run how neat or messy a person is impacts a marriage more than how good looking they are.

3. Romance does not take advice.

Romantic couples feel that they do not need the benefit of counseling, mentoring, or teaching because what they feel is real and the major determining factor in their decision to marry. In doing this they miss out on important marriage preparation advice and guidance.

4. Romance demands perfection.

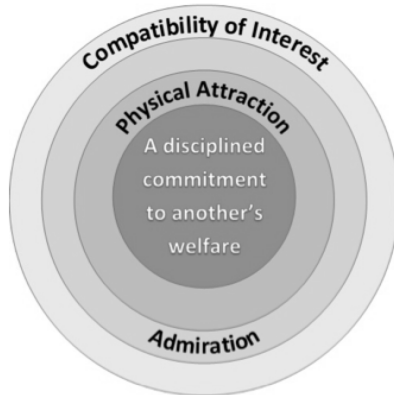
The intensity of romance is caused by the idealistic way we view our beloved. We are swept up by this fantastic feeling about this person. What happens, however, when the perfection and intensity of the feeling drops, even a little? Romance is not about building something, it is about maintaining something, and often about maintaining something that is not real. When romance slows down or disappoints or stops, we look for someone else to give us that feeling. "This one is the right one, I can just feel it."

LOVE

There are several emotions or experiences that we all have referred to as love, but the kind of love that is necessary to make a marriage work requires two things: a commitment to make another's welfare equal or better than one's own and self-discipline to back up that commitment. Notice the two components:

1. A commitment to consider another's welfare equal to one's own.

This is the highest form of human love. When people marry, they make a promise not just to be each other's spouse or never to leave. They promise first to "love," then honor, respect, etc. The commitment is to do this whether a person is well or ill, good circumstances or bad. Marrying is taking on the responsibility of caring for another person as well as we care for ourselves.



2. Self-discipline

We do not promise self-discipline, we need self-discipline in order to carry out our promise. Paul in I Corinthians 13 says, "love is patient, love is kind, is not jealous, love does not brag, and is not arrogant, love is not rude... is faithful..." This behavior of love is not possible without self-control.

The commitment to consider my partner's welfare equal or above my own requires me to control my sinful and selfish impulses. For example:

- I have to pick her up at 10 pm. I'm at my friend's house watching the championship match. The game goes into overtime and it is exciting, it is 9:50 pm...!?
- I love him but a new man at work gives signals and I feel attracted to him...!?
- I am tired, she is tired, the baby cries, it is 3 am...!?

Psychologists say some people are unable to love, not because they do not feel attracted to others, but because they lack the self-control to accomplish what love requires: considering another's welfare equal to our own. Marriages built on this definition of love, whether they are arranged or the result of a romantic impulse, will survive and grow because they have the single most important ingredient.

BUILDING ON LOVE

Love (commitment to another's welfare equal to our own, sustained by self-control) is the basic ingredient in a successful marital relationship. Once we have this in place, we begin to add to it in order to give our relationship its unique identity, flavor, and direction.

If love is in place, it is a joy to add the other elements. This is what growth in marriage is all about.

If something else is at the core, it will not support the difficulties of life that are sure to come and will not promote growth into other areas.

SUMMARY

It is never too late to take your marriage apart (not divorce but reexamine the relationship) and put it back together again with love at the core and the other layers added. This book will hopefully discuss some of these ideas as we go along.

What is needed is a recommitment by each partner.

- To consider the other's welfare **equal** or **above** our own.
- To begin asking God to bless us with the spiritual gift of self-control (Galatians 5:23) so we can love properly.

This love is the kind of love that Christ gives to the church.

This love is above human love.

This is *Agape* love.

This is loving as God loves.

This love enables us to be "in love for life."

2. THE CURRENCY OF LOVE

In our last chapter I focused on the idea that in order for marriages to last a lifetime they need to be based on the kind of love where each partner has a disciplined commitment to seek the well-being of their spouse to an equal or greater level than they have for themselves.

*“I want and work to give you the same
or better life than I want for myself.”*

In this chapter we'll look at the “currency of love.” So far, I have explained what marriages ought to be and what you need to work on in order to improve them. In this lesson we are going to look at a specific tool or method to help us have that successful relationship that all of us want in marriage, no matter how long we have been together.

The key, of course, is love. I have already mentioned that but the way to nurture and transfer that love from one to the other is through communication.

THE CURRENCY OF LOVE IS COMMUNICATION.

In other words, the substance of love, the way you move it around, the way you transfer it from one person to another is through communication.

In my counseling as a minister, I have seen people who have the capacity to love, who want to love, who need to love, but they do not communicate it well and for that reason they have problems.

Almost everything you do within marriage is done within the context of communication, so let's look at communication within marriage and see if we can find ways to increase this "currency of love."

KNOWLEDGE THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Marriages are held together by love and love is built through communication.

Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed.
- Proverbs 27:15

Better arguing and disagreement than no communication at all, at least there is a sign of life. Un-communicated love is like no love.

THE BIG "HOWEVER"

There is an idea that saying "I love you" is the only way, even the best way of communicating love. In our audio-visual world of TV, movies, and now the internet, we place a great emphasis on oral communication. We think if it is not communicated verbally (we can hear it) then, for some reason, it has not really been communicated.

We need to understand that the language of love can be communicated in many different ways, not just by words.

THE 5 LOVE LANGUAGES – GARY CHAPMAN

Love can be communicated in different ways:

1. **Words** – expressions of appreciation, loyalty, affection, love, admiration, attraction, etc. (use words of love).
2. **Gifts** – tokens of love and appreciation (things you buy, things you make). A card my wife makes is precious to me.

3. **Actions, service** – actions to please and comfort the other, the home, the family, care of the other’s possessions, etc.
4. **Time** – giving attention, quantity time, listening, watching, etc.
5. **Physical affection** – touching, holding, sexual intimacy.

Now, psychologists tell us that one of these is our “primary language” for love. One of these is our hot button that satisfies our need to know we are loved. Usually when love “dies” it is because we are no longer sure we love or are loved because it is not being communicated to us in a way, we can feel it.

We can express or receive all of these things but usually one of these is the one that convinces us that we are loved and if it is not pressed, we will not feel loved, no matter what else the other person does, or says. In other words, if you talk to me in my language of love, then I will feel loved.

Some examples of the language of love in action:

The wife’s “hot” button for knowing she is loved is words. Poems, love notes, saying sweet things, compliments on her looks, confessions of desire, the repeated words of love.

The husband grew up in a house where his dad was the strong and silent type. No fancy words.

The husband has grown up like his dad in this way but has learned to say I love you through generous service: he fixes her car, he takes care of the house, he does a lot of repair work for her elderly parents.

What tends to happen is that she will not feel loved because he is not expressing it in the way she needs it expressed (she needs words, not new tires on her car).

She will question his love and he will point out all the things he does for her, but she will not be satisfied because he is not speaking in her language of love.

This is how affairs begin... Someone else discovers your hot button and starts pressing it, and you let them because it feels so good!

Now an interesting feature about this language of love business: people tend to receive their love messages in the same way they give their love messages.

So, let's go back to our couple and see how this works. Remember she receives love through words, so this is usually the way she gives it; and he gives through action and service, so this is usually how he receives or recognizes love as well.

In a situation like this, she tells him she loves him and gives him mushy birthday cards and wants to talk about their relationship, but she is not interested in hanging out in the garage with him or working on projects together. He needs to hear "I love you" by her involvement with him in his interests and things. In the end, he feels smothered by her words and she feels rejected by his silence. Both are trying to love but each is missing the point, and the sad thing is that they do not realize it.

PRODUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

Now I have told you that some people want love, need love, desire to give love but fail in love because they cannot seem to communicate it well.

The answer for them is not to "start loving," they are already trying to do that; nor is the answer to love differently. I do not think people can change their basic personality in order to accomplish this. i.e. touchy, feely people cannot just change the way they are, it is not a superficial thing, it is who they are.

The answer, I believe, is to find ways to communicate about loving each other so we will understand, and hopefully, better receive and give the love we have to give and need for ourselves. The way to this is to make the communication you do have more effective and more productive in the sense that you are consciously improving the communication bridge between you.

There are ways to improve the communication between you and your spouse. Here are three basic elements that will make you connect more efficiently and effectively at every level:

1. Be totally honest.

...speaking the truth in love.
- Ephesians 4:15

For communication to be productive, you need to be honest, even if it is risky sometimes. Many times, we say what the other person wants to hear so we can get what we want. This works in the short term but is disastrous for long-term relationships.

The best example of this is when we compare the hierarchy of needs that men and women say that they need from each other. This survey shows what men and women acknowledge “privately” as their top 5 needs but rarely acknowledge to each other for fear of ridicule or rejection.

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Here are what men and women said were the top 5 things they needed from their partners in marriage.

MEN

WOMEN

1. Sexual Fulfillment

It is #1 because that is the way God created them. The natural production of seminal fluid in a man causes the constant need for gratification. It is the greatest single struggle each man must deal with in order to mature emotionally, socially and spiritually.

2. Play Mate

He wants his wife to be his buddy, his friend.

3. Attractiveness

A wife's looks and demeanor either build up a man's pride or bring it down.

4. Domestic Support

A quiet, clean, accepting home.

5. Admiration

Respect and encouragement

1. Affection

Not necessarily sex. Romance, cuddling, holding.

2. Attention

The sharing of thoughts. Really listening with feedback.

3. Trust

He supports her world, especially when there are children. She has to have confidence in him.

4. Financial Security

Enough to live on and provide for the family as well as enough to give the children an advantage.

5. Involvement

Getting involved in the home and family matters. Truly providing leadership.

What the survey showed were things we kind of knew from experience and observation:

Men are generally immature and more self-centered. They want attention and gratification and are not always willing to give in exchange for these. They need coaching!

Women are more high-minded and are usually willing to invest more to make the marriage work. However, they tend to ask for conflicting things:

- They want security and advantages for their children. These things place a greater burden on the husband if he is the primary earner.
- At the same time, they want him to be involved at home more. This is a good thing but a demand that requires time, time that may be needed at work!
- Sometimes women need to understand that they cannot have it both ways.

Couples need to understand that compromise is necessary if they are to have productive communication.

2. We also need to be clear.

For communication to be productive it also needs to be clear. More arguments, divisions and hurt feelings come from communication that is simply unclear than from intended insults. Those who speak need to make sure that the hearer has indeed understood what was said and the meaning of what was said. Hearers need to reassure the speaker that they have truly been understood. Our words and actions need to convey what we mean. If what you are doing means, "I am truly sorry" and not just "I am tired of arguing," make sure the other person knows about it.

Practice good "feedback" methods. Say or do what you will but always make sure (through feedback) that the other person has understood your words and intentions. ("Tell me what I have just said.")

3. For communication to be productive, it also needs to be complete.

We must tell the truth, express it clearly and tell it **all**. Some do not agree on this point but when one area is “taboo” or one of the partners declares a problem or discussion “off limits,” this creates frustration, resentment, and a gradual closing down of the communication network between people. Nothing kills love more than secrecy because love cannot grow in the shadows. Secrecy breeds mistrust.

There is no greater joy or protection than a loving partner with whom we can share all of our hearts.

SUMMARY

In closing I want to remind you that one of the best witnesses of your Christian faith is a loving marriage, and good communication is the key to building that love.

3.

CORDS OF LOVE

All of us are in a relationship of some kind and we usually want it to work, no matter what kind of relationship it is:

- A friendship
- A business partnership
- A family relationship or marriage
- A political relationship
- Even a spiritual fellowship

Every relationship needs certain elements in order to succeed and flourish. I call these elements "the cords of love" based on Solomon's proverb where he says that "a cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Proverbs 4:12).

In my view, there are five cords of love that keep relationships together and these are described in the book of Ruth.

The book of Ruth is a wonderful story of the love and devotion of a young woman who becomes a widow and takes care of her mother-in-law (who is also widowed) at great cost to herself. In this short book we see the five cords of love that help bind two people together in a loving relationship despite many obstacles.

The first of these is seen as the story unfolds.

1. THE CORD OF KINDNESS

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me." And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

- Ruth 1:1-15

Notice that Naomi (the mother-in-law) let both of her daughters go home - she released them from their family obligations so that they could start new lives. The custom of those days was that they remain with her to help her, but she chose to sacrifice herself for the good of her daughters-in-law.

Shared interests, beauty, intelligence, wealth, and power - these things are usually what attract a person to another in the beginning. However, kindness is what gives a relationship "staying power." In the everyday working out of a relationship, little and large acts of kindness are what actually build that relationship (not money or looks or even how smart you are). Conversely, lack of kindness such as being impolite, inconsiderate, thoughtless, stingy with compliments or kind gestures; these are things that lead to boredom and eventual separation.

Kindness is the first cord necessary to secure two people together in any kind of relationship.

2. THE CORD OF LOYALTY

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

- Ruth 1:16-22

Ruth's life and loyalty was sworn to her husband and family, and to that family she remained loyal.

- To live where they lived.
- To become as they were.
- To worship as they did.

She saw that her life changed for the better as a pagan Moab woman who married a Jew (who was a believer in God) and she wanted to remain loyal to this way of Godly living and its people, even if it meant giving up her chance at remarriage. For Ruth, being a widow among God's people was better than being married among pagans. The loss of her husband did not shake her loyalty to his family and beliefs. Trust, loyalty, faithfulness, perseverance; these are the pillars of a lasting relationship.

Each time a crisis, an argument, a disappointment, or a sin fails to destroy a relationship - it grows much stronger. Nothing strengthens relationships more dynamically than a show of loyalty at a critical moment.

When I see my wife, my friend, my family, church members or business associates choose to stay loyal to our relationship when temptation, trial, or other options come along - it makes me rejoice and enables me to actually feel the cords of love binding us together.

3. THE CORD OF 'HARD WORK'

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, "May the Lord be with you." And they said to him, "May the Lord bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in

charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" The servant in charge of the reapers replied, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" Boaz replied to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied. Her mother-in-law then said to her, "Where did you glean today and where

did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead." Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives." Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "Furthermore, he said to me, 'You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.'" Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that others do not fall upon you in another field." So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

- Ruth 2:1-23

In the story of Ruth, we see that her relationship with Naomi caused her to actually work very hard. She served as a hired hand and, as such, had no guarantees of payment or protection.

The parallel in today's relationships is obvious - you've got to work at it! Many partnerships, marriages and friendships fail because of laziness!

People think that relationships nourish themselves, but they don't. You've got to continually care for it much like you care for a garden, or a car. My mother used to say that a relationship is like a fire in a fireplace, you have to continually add wood and stir the ashes to keep the flame going.

In a relationship, the best way to do this is to:

A - Communicate honesty and deeply with each other on a regular basis.

For example: have regular "heart to heart" talks. So many times we let things go by or swallow our feelings and resentments and in doing so allow anger to boil. A good honest talk from time to time is liberating and joyful. When we really speak to each other from the heart, it clears the air and helps us go forward in our relationship with enthusiasm.

B - Do things together.

Work, play, serve, learn, explore, build, and dream together. The natural and easy thing to do is to do our "own thing" - whatever that is, because it is easier.

However, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot have the intimacy and rewards that come with a good relationship but continually ignore it in order to do our "own thing." Relationships work because people go from my "own thing" to "our thing." The work comes from the trial and error of figuring out what "our thing" is. This doesn't mean that we abandon all of the activities that we like to do by ourselves. It does mean however that we make room for some new things that build our relationships and not just ourselves.

C - Share spiritual things.

Every relationship improves with Christ. Business relationships open up. Friendships are deeper. Marriages solidify when the Spirit of Christ enters the relationship.

Here are some statistics from a study once done to measure the effects of religion on marriage:

- 1 out of 2 divorce – Couples who have no spiritual life
- 1 out of 40 divorce – One partner with a spiritual life
- 1 out of 400 divorce – Both partners have spiritual lives

Sharing spiritual things is not simply saying, "We're Christians, or we're believers." Sharing spiritual things means to be actively involved in spiritual things like worshipping together, praying together, serving together, and learning together. The great encouragement for relationships based on Christ is the fact that these have hope not only for this life but for the next one as well.

Let's briefly review what we've learned so far in this chapter: the third cord of love is hard work, and the best way to work at a relationship is to:

- Communicate honestly
- Do things together
- Share a spiritual life

The easiest thing to do in a relationship is to take each other for granted because:

- We're busy
- We're tired
- We're selfish
- We're distracted

However, people who enjoy successful relationships do so because they've invested time and effort into them -- just like every other successful thing in their lives.

4. THE CORD OF PATIENCE

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do." Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I.
- Ruth 3:1-4, 12

The only way Ruth could guarantee a better and stable life was for her to marry. The custom at that time however was that whoever married her now had to promise that their first-born son would inherit her dead husband's land (the idea of a "redeemer" – to buy back).

Of course, few men wanted the responsibility of raising a child to carry another man's name and inherit another man's property. Ruth was not a virgin and was a liability as far as finance and property were concerned and thus did not have much hope to marry. But she was patient and willing to follow Naomi's advice.

The hope that both these women had was that the richest man in the area would not only marry her and provide an heir for her dead husband, but would do this at personal financial and social risk to himself (i.e. he could have anyone, why take as wife a poor Moabite widow?). This episode shows us that the best partnerships work together patiently for the good of the relationship.

- I've learned from experience to listen to my wife's advice - especially when her counsel makes me upset.
- I've learned that not all matters and obstacles in a relationship can be settled in one day or one discussion.
- I've learned that when two flawed, imperfect, sinful people are in a relationship there are going to be offenses. This is 100% certain!

I've also learned that patience is often the ingredient in a relationship that maintains balance when things get difficult. If loyalty is the rope that binds you closer together, patience is the rope that keeps you in the relationship when the other ropes give way.

Patience is the safety rope when the others fail. Patience is the willingness to go on despite discomfort. It is the willingness to wait; the ability to carry a heavy load; the desire to forgive and make allowances for. Patience gives the benefit of the doubt and chooses to understand and work with the weaknesses and failings of someone we are in a relationship with.

No one is born with patience. Patience is something we learn one situation at a time, but it always pays off with a reward of some kind. For example, Ruth's patience led her to a loving and kind husband.

The true reward of patience however is that through patience we grow in our ability to love, to hope and to be wise. Impatient people make mistakes, ruin relationships, and rarely grow into emotional and spiritual maturity. Patience is what enables us to love despite the unlovely things we eventually see in our partners.

Of all the cords, it's the one most responsible for keeping relationships together over a great number of years.

5. FAITH IN GOD

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

- Ruth 4:13-22

From the very beginning no one could know what God's plan was in all of this: that Ruth and Boaz would produce a child who would be the grandfather of the great king David.

David, who became the greatest king of Israel. The one who wrote the beautiful book of Psalms and who would be in the direct lineage of Jesus through his earthly father, Joseph.

Ruth's faith in God began with Naomi, and then the man she married, Boaz. Each entered into a relationship with another based on faith.

- Ruth with Naomi
- Boaz with Ruth

And their faith was rewarded beyond expectations. Their greatest hope was to have a good marriage with children and grandchildren. Their reward of faith was that in addition to these things, they also secured a direct relationship with a future king, and the future Messiah.

All relationships end in failure or death -- without exception. As one speaker has said, "All marriages end at the divorce court or the funeral home." Pretty discouraging...

The first four cords of love can't protect you against death. However, those relationships that have as a basis - faith in God and trust in Christ, have an element (a cord) that others do not have.

These people have the hope that their relationships will transcend this world and continue into the next. This reality and promise of God is what gives a relationship between Christian spouses, friends and family an extra measure of joy, hope and confidence.

Adding the cord of faith to our relationships closes the circle of eternity between ourselves and other believers ... no matter how we're related to them.

SUMMARY

So, there they are - the five cords of love that promote successful and happy relationships.

1. The cord of kindness - Builds it up
2. The cord of loyalty - Binds it strongly
3. The cord of hard work - Breaks the boredom
4. The cord of patience - Balances it in troubled times
5. The cord of faith - Brings it into another dimension

You may be thinking, "Where is the cord of love? Isn't that necessary for a happy and lasting relationship?" The answer is yes, love is necessary and it's there - I've just described it to you. This is what true love looks like when it is present and being expressed by two individuals in any relationship.

When you take the five strands together it produces love.

My prayer is that these cords of love will surround and bless each of your relationships. God bless each of you, and each of your relationships now and in the future.

4.

HOLY SEX – PART 1

Let's face it, you cannot have a book on love and marriage without a discussion about the role of sex in that relationship. Since I am neither a marriage counselor nor a sex therapist, I will not be discussing this topic from a dysfunctional or mechanics perspective (i.e. The psychological reasons why a man or woman has stopped having sex or is attracted to a certain type of sex act), I will not discuss the mechanics of sex or how to "improve" one's performance, etc.

As the title of this lesson indicates, I want us to examine the spiritual nature of human sexuality. Learning the meaning of "holy" sex will give you not only a better appreciation for sex and each other, it will also help you see God's role in the experience of oneness and intimacy that sex creates.

SEX AND THE MIND OF GOD

Let me voice a question that many of you may already be thinking or will surely be thinking before long as you read this book. "If God really did create sex and if He did give it to married couples as a special gift, why is sex such a struggle?"

I rarely see couples that have a bad marriage but great sex; or a wonderful marriage but bad sex. Sex is not always the cause of marriage problems, but it is very often the indicator of how satisfying and happy the marriage is in general.

I believe that part of the reason we struggle so much with sex in marriage is because of what we have been taught about it over the centuries, especially within Christianity. In the last 1000 years there

have been some major changes and attitudes about the role and meaning of sex within marriage.

1. The first generation (especially the Roman Catholic perspective) viewed sex (especially the pleasurable part) as a necessary evil in the need to procreate as was commanded in Genesis 1:22.

2. With time (several centuries) we came to the understanding that the pleasure in sex is God-given and, therefore, blessed by Him in marriage. This probably had a lot to do with the Protestant Reformation and the greater number of clergymen who now could marry. Their marital experiences brought greater clarity and understanding to their view of this subject in the Bible.

3. The modern generation has come to the conclusion that since God blesses sex, we should use every tool and every technology to embrace this wonderful gift so as to maximize its pleasure. The problem here is that even though the inhibitions and false information about sex are gone for modern Christians, there is still a tremendous amount of struggle, pain and dysfunction within Christian couples. With all this freedom and technology something is still missing.

4. The latest thinking on this issue can be summarized in the phrase “META-SEX” (not MEGA, META). The word META is from the Greek, meaning beyond, beyond the usual experience of sex. The thinking is that God designed sex to be more, to go beyond the idea that it is simply a fun thing for married people to do while they are having babies.

God designed sex to be an encounter with the divine! No other experience is like it. It is “other worldly” and it is this way to give us a glimpse into the only “other world” that exists, the heavenly, spiritual realm!

If this is so, then sex is holy, sex is sacred, sex is not only a pathway to be one with our spouse, it is also a way to experience oneness with God.

These are lofty ideals and challenging goals, but the research confirms that as we grow in our understanding that sex is a God-given holy event, we also grow in the level of love for our mate and have greater satisfaction in marriage.

SEX AS HOLY

It is with this thinking about holiness, therefore, that we say that sex is holy. It is holy because:

1. It was created by the Holy God before sin even entered the world to corrupt it. Like everything else, sex was created perfect and spiritually pure from the beginning.
2. Sex is holy because God designed it to be one of His special experiences. The Jews designed houses, monuments, etc. but God personally designed the Ark of the Covenant, therefore it became holy. Man acts out in many ways, but sexual activity was designed by God. Therefore, it has, by design, a spiritual meaning as opposed to other human actions that do not.
3. Sex is holy because God set it apart for specific purposes that He decreed:

A. The purpose of creating the “one flesh” experience between a man and a woman was for them to experience the holy oneness designed by God in sexual union - Genesis 1:24.

This is why sex between men and men, women and women, or any other combination other than one man and one woman in marriage is not permitted. These combinations do not use sex in its original and holy purpose and are thus sinful.

Ok, there can be affection and sexual experience that is pleasurable in these other unions, but they are not holy in God’s eyes because they are not pursued for His purpose. Making something lawful, even acceptable to society does not necessarily make it holy. It is only holy if done according to God’s plan and for His purpose. God set the sexual experience apart for the purpose of creating “oneness” in marriage between one man and one woman.

B. To represent the relationship between Christ and His Church - Ephesians 5:31-32.

God designed the tabernacle and ark as well as other objects used in worship to “represent” the process of salvation. The sacrifice of animals,

sprinkling of blood on the ark, tablets of the Law, separation of the outer and inner rooms of the tabernacle... all of these were objects that God used to teach man the story and meaning of His work with Christ.

In the same way, sex is holy because God uses it in marriage to represent another eternal truth: the reality of the intimate relationship that Christ has with His church that will be fulfilled when He comes. Before the beginning of time, God planned the eventual relationship between the church and her Lord and Savior. Before the beginning of time, God set aside the oneness in marriage achieved through sex to represent, in physical terms, what was true and present in spiritual terms.

This is why adultery is sin, why God hates divorce, why the roles of wives, husbands and children are clearly explained: so that marriage (biblical model) will reflect accurately what God originally designed it for, and what it is supposed to represent with Christ and His church.

C. Procreation – Genesis 1:28

God could have designed us in such a way that we could procreate in much simpler and less involving ways. But conceiving children is a direct result of the experience of sex within marriage. It is tied to the experience of “oneness” by the couple. We can produce children in other ways, but not all of these ways are holy in the way they reflect God’s design (e.g. surrogate mother).

D. For worship – I Thessalonians 5:18

Just as the appearance of the burning bush filled Moses with awe and devotion, a true experience of the “oneness” that God designed sex to produce in marriage can lead us to a sincere heartfelt sense of gratitude and praise for this wonderful gift He has given us.

I am not saying that having sex is worship. The pagans used sexual activity in their worship rituals out of a distorted reasoning that offering and sharing this other-worldly experience would please the gods. We know what God wants of us in public and corporate worship, and how we are to conduct ourselves so that we do not fall into this trap.

What I am saying is that this powerful experience, when used to create oneness in marriage, can lead us to a greater and worshipful

appreciation of the God who gave us this gift. If sex is wonderful and you feel grateful for the experience, do not be afraid to thank God. He gave the experience for that very reason, that you might lift your heart up to Him in joy and thanksgiving.

This idea that sex is holy because of its Creator, its design, and its purpose, was not always taught in the church, or in society. In the past we have been taught that sex is essentially evil and only tolerated by God for procreation. Much of this stemmed from the Roman Catholic teachings of Augustine who taught that the “knowledge of good and evil” in the Garden of Eden was sexual awareness and that sinfulness was passed on from generation to generation through human sexuality.

The early Protestant reformers took a softer view describing sex within marriage “disorderly” at best. Today, thankfully, we have come around to the attitude that, “We should not be afraid to discuss what God was not ashamed to create.” (Dr. A Gardner, *“Sacred Sex”*, p. 15.

So, in this chapter and the next, we will examine the relationship God intended between human sexuality and spiritual awareness and experience.

THE DEEPER MEANINGS OF SEX

We are not the only ones that are reexamining human sexuality in order to find deeper spiritual significance. Many in the world are exploring the same territory to see if there is more to sex than just the physical, to see if there is some sort of spiritual component as well.

Their mistake is that they try to find this spiritual component by manipulating the physical aspects of the experience. Drugs, techniques, pornography, paraphernalia, various partner combinations, all done to heighten pleasure, thinking this will reveal deeper meanings and worlds.

As in all things, however, Christ is the key. He is the way to higher and deeper knowledge in all things and it is no different here. In Christ we learn about the true God, the truth of His Word, and the truth about ourselves including our sexual selves. In this context the holy essence of sexual experience is revealed because it is only in the sexual union of both male and female that the full image of God is represented.

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

- Genesis 1:27

It is not Adam that is in the image of God. It is not Eve that is in the image of God. It is Adam and Eve as one (sexually arrived at as one) that together are in the true image of God.

The Godhead's (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) image is reflected in Adam and Eve when they are in "one flesh." Divinity has a dynamic fusion (3 in 1) and humanity also has a dynamic fusion (2 in 1).

Let's make a math syllogism out of this idea:

- If "oneness" = Image of God
- And sex = Oneness in marriage
- Then sex = Image

This is the basis of the spiritual component of human sexuality. Not what or how intensely you feel, but what the total experience is supposed to represent.

We are never more "like" the way God created us; we are never truer to the image that He created us in, than when we are pursuing oneness in marriage, and human sexuality is the primary interaction designed by God to create and maintain this oneness.

SUMMARY

Someone may say... "So?!" We are like God when we are one, and we become one primarily through sexual union, so? So, this truth serves us in several ways:

1. It reveals the true role of human sexuality within marriage. Not just for pleasure, release, children, bargaining, power, etc. God designed it to be used to create oneness. This is its ultimate purpose, and we know we have achieved "good" sex when this goal is reached.

2. This truth frees us from the guilt and discomfort that many feel about sex, even in marriage. Sex in marriage is a God-given, God-blessed and

therefore holy thing. This knowledge gives us freedom to pursue and enjoy this aspect of marriage to the fullest without fear or shame.

3. This truth opens our eyes to the pathway of personal fulfillment, marriage! People want to “find” themselves; get themselves together; feel more fulfilled so they travel or become more promiscuous or worse still, divorce their partner in search of new love.

The Bible says that the “complete” person is the one who is complete in Christ (spiritually), Colossians 1:28, and complete emotionally and physically when “one” with another person in marriage, Genesis 1:27.

That you are reading this book means that you are still seeking both simultaneously.

HOMework

In your marital intimacy this week, pursue, discuss, and think “oneness” instead of pleasure and satisfaction.

5.

HOLY SEX – PART 2

Let us review some key ideas we have looked at so far:

1. Spirituality and sexuality are connected.
2. God designed human sexuality for physical purposes: procreation, comfort, pleasure, human fulfillment, and also for a spiritual purpose, to create “oneness” between two people.
3. When this “oneness” is achieved, it in turn opens the door to deeper understanding of spiritual realities such as:
 - The true image of man created to reflect God’s image (a return to the Garden).
 - The experience and nature of Christ’s relationship with the church that is to come and last forever.
 - The ultimate private honoring of God and His creation.
4. Because God created sex to lead us to these spiritual truths, this act and the relationship that surrounds it is holy or sacred as are all things specifically created by God for spiritual purposes (the ark, the temple, the church).
5. To use sex in any other “context” (e.g. outside of marriage, the union of two men or two women, etc.) or to use it for some other purpose (i.e. for power - rape, or money - porn) is to use a “holy” thing in an unholy way and is thus sinful.

This is why not all sex is holy sex. When we misuse human sexuality in any way its power turns against us and instead of empowering us to

oneness and deeper spiritual truth and experience, we are blinded and left empty.

I have talked about “oneness” through sex, but that does not mean that oneness happens automatically when two people have sex. There is a learning curve.

CASE STUDY

In some of the material I am using for this book, there are several counseling case studies used to provide background information. I want to share part of one of these to set up my next point.

This is the dialogue between Kevin and Brenda as they shared their problems with a therapist.

Brenda kept apologizing for the feelings she was sharing. She didn't want to hurt her husband, Kevin, but she had kept her thoughts hidden for too long. Now, for the sake of her marriage, she was glad that everything was finally coming out. Kevin was sitting next to Brenda in my counseling office, but he wished he could be somewhere else.

“I know I am not supposed to exaggerate,” Brenda began, “but it seems that every time we're alone, Kevin makes some sexually suggestive comment aimed at getting me to have sex with him. I feel like he must spend his days coming up with new lines to try to get me to say yes. And if it's not a comment, it's a grab. I can be cooking or doing the dishes, and he'll come up behind me and plant both of his hands on my breasts. A hug would be great. But he can't seem to touch me without it being in an erogenous zone.”

Brenda assured me that she didn't hate sex. “I can get aroused, and sometimes I even have an orgasm. But the more Kevin pushes, the less I want to have sex. The more he talks about ‘doing it,’ the more I feel that sex between us is just that: a cold, impersonal ‘it.’”

“And have you begun to feel like an ‘it’ too?” I asked.

“Yes. Yes I have.”

Brenda’s story is another sad example of how much we are missing in our sex lives. By losing sight of sex as a holy act, we are depriving ourselves of the richness and deep satisfaction that God designed it to provide. Since sex is invested with so much spiritual meaning, that should affect the way we approach our moments of sexual intimacy, but how? When we acknowledge the truth that sex on God’s terms is sacred, we can stop fighting about frequency, positions, and who initiates it.

Sacred Sex, T.A. Gardner, Waterbrook Press, 2002

The thing that Kevin did not “get” and that Brenda was searching for without being able to articulate it was the idea that the number one purpose for sex is not procreation or recreation, it is unification!

This unification or “oneness” goes beyond the actual physical unity that is experienced in the sex act. As a matter of fact, the physical sexual union is actually an outward manifestation of a deeper more powerful spiritual reality taking place.

In this context, the sex act becomes a celebration of the soul-deep bond that is present when a couple knows and experiences the certainty that they are together permanently, and together permanently for divine purposes, not just physical ones. But in order for sex in marriage to become an actual celebration of the deeper oneness shared, a couple must have a shared life emotionally and physically outside of their sexual union as well.

In the case of Brenda and Kevin they could not connect sexually because their focus was not on oneness, but rather on their individual needs and desires: Kevin was absorbed in his physical impulses, and he remained focused on orgasm. Brenda became focused on self-preservation and maintaining her self-respect. Everything about their sexual encounters, both in bed and out, was a battle for the achievement of their individual goals and desires, not for their mutual benefit. They were learning the hard lesson that whenever we make orgasm the goal of sex, we fail to experience Godly/holy sex.

This is where the issue of masturbation comes in. Masturbation has some benefits as far as sexual release is concerned for those who have no spouse or their spouse is not accessible (separation, illness, etc.). The problem with it is that it cannot produce oneness unless shared with our spouse.

Many individuals focused only on orgasm (people like Kevin here) turn to the combination of pornography and masturbation in a search for satisfaction. This is terrible because it pushes them further away from their partners and the true satisfaction they crave, and it creates an addiction to a powerful stimulant that only enslaves but never satisfies. Masturbation usually produces guilt of some kind, not satisfaction.

The experience of “oneness” in sex can only be achieved if we share every part of our lives together and then celebrate this unity through sexual oneness. In other words, the big “O” in sexual experience is not orgasm, it is oneness.

ONENESS IN SEX

The idea that human sexuality was created to produce “oneness” is a Biblical idea and one recognized by many in the ancient as well as modern world. We, in our sex saturated society of the last hundred years, have gone away from this concept and reaped the consequences: high divorce rates, more blended families, increased pornography and sexual abuse, dysfunctional families as well as sexual confusion (homosexuality and other sexual disorders).

In the past and in other cultures today this “oneness” idea is embraced and blessed by those who pursue it. For example, to Jews, sex is the ultimate “bonding” experience. In Hebrew the word “*Yada*” is often used to describe sex between a man and a woman. It means to know by observation, reflection, and experience. This term, however, has been hijacked to mean something else in our society. Now the expression, *Yada, Yada, Yada*, is simply a way of saying, “You know the rest, you’re familiar with what I am saying.”

In Genesis 4:1 the Bible says, “Adam knew his wife and she conceived.” Sexual intercourse, by God’s description, is the way of knowing and experiencing another human being in the most intimate way possible.

Another example: in the Dutch language the slang word for sex is *NAAIEN* which means “to sew.” You sew two pieces of cloth together so that long after the sewing is done the two pieces remain closely knit together as one. God sews us together in marriage through human sexuality. In this way we can become one without losing our individuality.

Marital sex works as a circle of oneness. Having been joined by the oneness of intercourse, that union affects every other aspect of our relationship. Feeling cherished and valued in other parts of our lives creates the desire to be one again with our mates through sex. In God’s design, sex creates oneness and oneness fosters a climate of unity and love that circles around to create more and better sex.

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER “O”?

I have talked a lot about the “spiritual” nature of human sexuality but not much about its physical nature, and yet our primary experience is physical. I use the example from a previous chapter, that God could have designed a way to achieve oneness without the use of sex or the experience of orgasm, but He did! God gave us this!

As I said before, when pursued for its own pleasure, sexual experience will always follow the law of diminishing return (i.e. the first powerful orgasm experienced through individual masturbation will yield less and less power and pleasure if repeated). The first powerful climax experienced through premarital or homosexual, or adulterous, or any form of illicit sex, will only produce less and less power and pleasure until newer and more deprived experiences are tried.

Even within marriage, sex pursued simply to gratify our urges will eventually lose its allure and spontaneity as well as its pleasure. That is why counseling offices are filled with unhappy, confused singles and unhappy, unsatisfied couples.

However, when sex within marriage is seen as a part of a bigger picture, a spiritual activity, then the potential for maintaining sexual satisfaction and excitement remains and the law of diminishing returns is suspended.

The pursuit of oneness affects not only the way we “think” about sex, but the way we experience sex as well. For those who pursue oneness through sex, each partner abandons control of their own orgasm to their partner at the moment they feel most vulnerable.

This is what Paul the Apostle is getting at:

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

- I Corinthians 7:3-5

The word “duty” comes from the word “debt” or to owe something. The husband “owes” his wife the pleasure she needs to be satisfied because this duty has been given to him by God and vice-versa. The body (this includes the erogenous zones) does not belong to the person but to the spouse! My wife is responsible for my pleasure and fulfillment, not me, and I for hers. In sexual union my focus is her pleasure, not my own and her focus is my pleasure, not her own.

This is why people who struggle with “control” issues and with trusting their mate often struggle with achieving orgasm. They are always on guard, never wanting to give up the control or responsibility for their own pleasure to their mate.

However, it is when we abandon control to our mate and trust them with our most vulnerable state, that the full union of physical oneness is most deeply experienced.

We can reach a transparent, vulnerable, totally open state with our mate because of one reason. We know and believe that the orgasmic experience we hope for in sex has been created by God Himself, and available through oneness with our spouse.

We can take the risk of vulnerability, openness, and abandonment because God has chosen this as the pathway to physical and sexual fulfillment with our mate. We can trust that this is not only the right way to have sex, it is the only way to be completely satisfied physically and spiritually.

HOMEWORK

Find a time to pray together and during this time do 3 things:

1. Confess your sins to each other.
2. Bless one another with words of praise.
3. Ask God to show you ways other than sex that you can be one.
Working on oneness leads to more satisfying sex.

6.

THE MONEY TRAP

As the title suggests, this chapter is about money. This is a very important issue in marriage. People have different attitudes about how to handle money when they commit to a marriage.

Some researchers have found that money issues are responsible for up to 70% of marital conflict.

There are many reasons for this:

- Different ideas and training concerning money. For spending, saving, investing, etc.
- Many don't discuss it seriously before marriage. Comes as a nasty surprise after.
- Partners come from very different economic backgrounds.

The "conflict" in a relationship over money usually centers around 2 main factors:

- **Earning power** – the ability to make money.
- **Lifestyle** – the style of living that we think, hope, and believe that we should have.

The way we use (or misuse) money is based largely on these two factors. If our earning power can supply our lifestyle, there is no problem. However, if our earning power cannot supply our lifestyle then this will

create problems that will produce pressure within all of our relationships - especially our marriages.

This financial pressure is the result of what I call the Money Trap.

THE MONEY TRAP AND HOW IT WORKS

Before we have any earning power (trade, vocation, business experience or training) our concepts of lifestyle (how we ought to live) are being formed by external and internal forces.

A. External Forces

1. How our parents lived, their attitude towards money and what we were taught about these things.
2. Easy credit.
 - Most powerful external force today.
 - Did not exist 50 years ago (ease of it).
 - Exchanging future work for goods now.
 - On a consumer level not as widespread as now.
3. Abundance and variety of merchandisers and merchandise.

B. Internal Forces (negative)

1. Greed - never having enough.
2. Jealousy - wanting what others have
3. Pride - competing with others
4. Laziness - gaining without effort
5. Lack of self control - impulse and luxury buying
6. Selfishness - interest in one's own needs

C. The Trap

Here's how the trap gets sprung.

1. Our society bombards us via media images of the ideal lifestyle. The media creates for us the style it says we deserve, we should have and, if not properly trained in money management, we believe it! The code

words appeal to our inward forces by saying - you deserve the best, get it now, it's easy, be the first, be the only, etc. Day after day, after day.

2. Goods are made accessible everywhere to provide this ideal lifestyle, and merchandizers make it easy to respond (pick up the phone and dial).

3. Easy credit makes all of these things available to everyone - even those who cannot afford it - and these are the ones that are caught in the trap! These are the people who spend more than they earn.

The best examples are the people caught in the housing breakdown in the United States in the last few years. These forces working together create a vicious cycle - we see, we want, and easy credit enables us to get it.

The slogan for our society should be "Get it with Credit!"

I'm not against a strong economy, an efficient network of merchandising and distribution as well as a banking system that allows us to use credit as a tool for establishing our homes and businesses. The point I'm trying to make here is that in order to avoid being crushed in this system of ours, we need to realize that our lifestyle should be based on our earning power, not on how our parents lived, how we would like to live, how the TV says we should live, how our friends live - but on our earnings. A very sobering thought indeed.

SUMMARY

Society, combined with internal and external forces, creates the image of a lifestyle we think we should have. We believe this ideal and instead of basing our lifestyle on our own earning power - we use easy credit to obtain the lifestyle we think we should have.

So, we get into debt and debt causes pressure in relationships.

FINANCIAL PRESSURE HAS MANY SYMPTOMS.

- Fatigue - physical and emotional. The "weight" of debt causes depression.

- Obsession - we think and talk only about money and money problems.
- Arguments - we blame others for spending too much or not making enough.
- Sexual disinterest - it's difficult to be intimate with someone you've lost respect for.
- Financial ruin - eventually you have no more credit, just debts and debts you cannot pay.
- Spiritual discouragement - the feeling that God doesn't love you or is punishing you because of your financial ruin.

Pressure of this kind can easily destroy a relationship.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE MONEY TRAP

There are many financial advisors and plans, but you need to be careful not to make matters worse. Not all financial solutions are equal.

A. BAD SOLUTIONS (DEFINED AS ANIMALS)

1. The ostrich solution

- Refuse to admit the problem.
- Ignored problems only grow worse.

2. The chicken solution

- Escape (vacation, buy something new, get a good feeling).
- Only a temporary solution at best, you only feel good for a while.
- Usually creates more debt and is fatalistic.

3. The parakeet solution

- Repeat the same mistake.

- Have lots of little debts? Consolidate into one big debt. Bad use of credit.
- We now have one large debt and begin creating new small debts in addition to the big one.

4. The horse solution

- More debt? Just work like a horse.
- Second job, overtime, wife gets a job too.

5. The spider solution

Like the Black Widow who eats its mate, eliminate the seeming cause of the problem - your partner (divorce). This doesn't eliminate the problem; it merely creates more problems and more debts. There is no such thing as a budget divorce.

Most people who are continually in financial trouble are so because they refuse to base their lifestyle on their salaries and then when they are in the trap, they get deeper into it by using some of the poor solutions I've just mentioned.

B. GOOD SOLUTIONS

There are good problem solving methods for financial difficulties.

1. Establish your style of living based on your current earning power, not your future. In this way you will have a better chance to be free from debt and the financial pressure that comes with it (Proverbs 22:7).

If we could learn this, we would be free. "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender." This practice is not easy, it requires:

- Honesty - being realistic about what you can afford.
- Self-control - saying **no** to yourself, impulses.
- Alertness - be aware of the "trap"
 - Advertisers know that women make or influence most of the money decisions and this is why ads are directed at

them primarily. Men are greater impulse buyers than women and they buy more expensive things. (Appeal to men's pride - my hero!)

- Contentment
 - We should learn to be satisfied with what we have knowing that God has provided it, whatever it is (1 Tim. 6:6-10). If we have enough to provide an honorable life, then we have enough - more than this can be risky.
 - The art of being content with what we have is the gateway to freedom, peace of mind and true enjoyment of life. Contentment eliminates greed, pride, and inner pressures.

For men the trick is to be realistic about what they truly can afford to buy and for women the true challenge of submission is to respect and live within their husband's (or the primary earner's) earning power.

2. Another good problem-solving technique for financial stress, aside from living within your earning power, is to establish priorities for the way you will spend the money you do have!

Give the first portion to God. (Proverbs 3:9-10; 11:24; Luke 12:34)

When you give the first portion to God:

- He blesses the entire amount, it becomes holy, as if you gave the entire amount to Him. The giving of the first portion symbolizes the giving of the entire amount.
- He gives you the wisdom to manage the rest.

When you do this you express your trust in Him to provide. Credit limits are not financial protection. God is financial protection! Psalm 37:25

Establish a reasonable budget in order to manage the rest of your income wisely, not forgetting to provide for your family.

SUMMARY

If you spend more than you earn, you are in debt and debts cause pressure, especially in marriage relationships. There are positive and negative ways of dealing with this pressure. You can ignore it, try to escape it, try to increase your workload, or divorce your partner. All of which will cause more problems. You can exercise honesty, self-control, and contentment, and live within your means.

This can be done. You begin by:

- Giving God the first portion in everything.
- Trusting God to help you manage the rest (good management begins with a reasonable budget).

This is good advice for those who don't want to be caught in the Money Trap!

7. WHY CHRISTIANS DIVORCE

The Bible teaches that a man and a woman are to remain married for life (Matthew 19:5-6). Of course, this principle is violated in many ways as people commit adultery, divorce, or simply live in ways that are against God's will.

When people become Christians, however, they once again strive for this ideal (one man and one woman for life) as their standard for marriage. For this reason, it is sad to see Christians getting divorces. I mean, you expect to see this in non-Christian homes, but when Christians divorce, they go against a very basic belief and command of their faith. This trend seems to be growing because more and more Christian marriages are ending in divorce.

When I say "Divorce", what do you see? Most see lawyers, court papers, division of property and custody battles. We think that if we are not at the point of hiring lawyers, we have no problem with divorce. But divorce happens long before we get to court, and if we want to avoid it there are some things we need to know and do.

UNDERSTAND WHAT DIVORCE IS AND WHEN IT IS HAPPENING TO YOU.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother,
and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And
the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.
- Genesis 2:24-25

In Genesis 2:24-25, we see a man and woman create a new union when they become one flesh.

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.
- Matthew 19:9

In Matthew 19:9, when Jesus is speaking of divorce, he uses the words “put away” translated into English as divorce. This Greek word meant to loosen, or to untie, like a knot that was tied and is now being loosened and untied. When using this term, Jesus is not talking about court proceedings or lawyers or papers. He is talking about what is actually taking place in the life of the couple. He is talking about one partner beginning to untie the bond that unites them to the other partner. Jesus reminds us that divorce does not begin in court, it begins in the heart and ends in court. So, according to the words used in the Bible, you have a divorce problem when you desire to be joined/united to someone or something else other than your partner: another person, work, hobbies, or yourself. In other words, you allow someone or something to come between you and your partner: sin (lies, bad habits, unkindness, indifference, selfishness), family (joined to your partner, not your parents, children, etc. In a Christian marriage, your spouse is your priority), ambition (don't go where you cannot take your partner).

Many people are legally married, but they have been working on a loosening of the bonds or untying the knot for a long time.

KNOW WHAT GOD REALLY THINKS ABOUT IT.

I have mentioned this before, but the Bible condemns divorce as a sin and this should make Christians think twice about doing this, or things that lead up to it. The guilty party is not the one who gets a lawyer and actually files for divorce, the guilty party is the one who unties the knot, loosens the bonds, separates themselves from the partner in a thousand little ways that cause the final decree in court.

When God pronounces on divorce, He is not just talking about lawyers and judgments; He is talking about the loosening, the putting away and the untying.

“For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the Lord of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”
- Malachi 2:16

Malachi 2:16 says that He hates it. Why? Because divorce is sin and causes pain.

So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.
- Matthew 19:6

Matthew 19:6 says that He forbids it.

Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.
- Hebrews 13:4

Divorce begins by a lessening of the commitment to remain bonded together and finishes with a final legal break in court. God condemns the beginning as well as the final result. God never approves of us loosening or breaking our bonds, but He does protect the innocent:

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.
- Matthew 19:9

You are innocent if your marriage is broken through the adultery of your partner, innocent if the marriage is broken by the departure of the unbelieving spouse.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.
- I Corinthians 7:15

God did not give these exceptions as a way out of marriage, He gave them to protect the innocent victims of broken marriages... so that they would not have to bear a burden of guilt in addition to the pain they suffered from a failed marriage.

KNOW WHAT TO DO TO KEEP THE BOND STRONG.

It is not just about avoiding bad things; it is also about doing certain things that will help avoid the temptation to loosen the bonds that lead to divorce in the first place. Here are some things necessary to keep the bonds strong:

1. Complete honesty

Good marriages require good communication and good communication requires total honesty. When the bond is weakening or threatened, we need to be open and honest about the reasons for it. If it is sin, we need to confess it. If it is someone or something, we need to expose it; usually both parties have things they need to reveal. If it is family, children, friends, work, or hobbies interfering, we need to offer reassurance that our partner has a priority position.

There should be no such thing as keeping part of lives private. “One flesh” means one mind, one body and this is impossible without total honesty.

2. Complete fidelity

Fidelity does not mean just avoiding sex with someone else (although this is naturally included). Faithfulness in marriage means that we keep ourselves totally exclusive for our partners. The best side, the best words, the best attitude, these we reserve for our partner.

Some men are cheerful at work, charming with the waitresses and good sports with their buddies, but none of that seems to make it past the front door when they get home. They have given the best of themselves away and have nothing left for the one person they owe their best selves to.

Some women get along with their parents, will excuse the shortcomings of their friends, but continually nag their husbands. Some spouses work harder at their jobs than at trying to please their partners.

The more exclusive our relationship is, the more precious it becomes. Exclusivity keeps our emotional and physical relationship fresh and satisfying. If we trust our partner because of their demonstrated absolute fidelity and devotion, we will have confidence to open-up, to explore and to change in order to please them.

If we feel neglected or sense a lack of fidelity by the other, we will not have the confidence to completely give ourselves, and a vicious cycle of unraveling marriage ties will be the result.

3. Complete submission to Jesus Christ

In the end, what is it about a woman that will make her a joy to her husband?

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.
- Proverbs 31:30

I want my wife to be a good Christian because that is the only way she will be complete as a wife for me.

An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,
But she who shames him is like rotteness in his bones.
- Proverbs 12:4

In the end what makes a man worthy of a godly woman?

If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.
- Joshua 24:15

A man completely dedicated to doing the will of the Lord will win the respect and confidence of his wife. A woman will gladly submit to a man who, like Christ, is willing to lay down his life (pride, selfishness, desires) for the good of his wife, as Christ laid down His perfect life for the church.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,
- Ephesians 5:25

When Jesus Christ rules the heart of the man and the woman, He is the knot that keeps the couple tied together as one flesh.

4. Develop spiritual intimacy

The marriage vow enables us to practice emotional and physical intimacy without guilt or shame. In marriage we become one flesh and create physical intimacy. In order to secure the bonds, however, we must learn to cultivate spiritual intimacy alongside of physical intimacy. Spiritual intimacy comes from the overflow of our own personal spiritual intimacy with God. It is hard to develop spiritual intimacy with someone else if you have not experienced it between yourself and God.

There are several other roadblocks that hinder the development of spiritual intimacy with our partner:

- Hectic schedules: no time for prayer or sharing.
- Poor communication skills: people do not know how to share or open up about spiritual things.
- Unresolved problems in marriage: the couple uses prayer time to rehash old squabbles.
- Feelings of spiritual inferiority: one has more Bible knowledge than the other.
- Lack of spiritual experiences: couples who do not go to church, never study the Bible, have a hard time developing spiritual intimacy.

There are also several things you can do to develop a spiritual intimacy with your partner:

- Unconditional commitment to the marriage.
- Ask for what you want. This opens honest communication.
- Model what you need in your life. Modeling helps the other see the things that are important to you.
- Understand spiritual types. Some know God through study, others feel God and His love, and some do God's work. Different people come to "Godness" in different ways.
- Listen to each other. Study to know your mate and identify their expectations from you.
- Spend time together. You need quantity time to build quality relationships. Avoid too many separate activities.
- Check-in time. Let the other know where your emotional and spiritual center is each day.
- Share "bonding" times. Trips, projects (challenge, crisis), prayer, worship, study, serving, giving.

We tie the knot at the wedding, but we tighten the knot by developing spiritual intimacy.

SUMMARY

Divorce is always a temptation in this society, but we can divorce proof our marriages:

1. Watch for the danger signs and admit them – things that tempt us to loosen the bond.
2. Understand that it is morally wrong. Regardless of what society says, God forbids it.
3. Work at things that will keep the bond strong:
 - a. Complete truthfulness
 - b. Fidelity in all things
 - c. Submission to Christ
 - d. Cultivate spiritual intimacy as well as physical intimacy.

Remember, while we are still married, it is never too late to avoid divorce.

8.

MARRIAGE OR DIVORCE

Some marriages work better than others in the same way that some people are “naturals” at sports or computers. Some marriages just “click” and aside from sickness or accidents, the relationship is a smooth and effortless thing that just goes on and on, year after year. Like anything else, these types of marriages exist but are in the minority, the majority of marriages go through various stages that are not always so smooth.

The stages of a marriage have been documented and go something like this:

1. Romantic stage

In this stage each partner says to the other, “I commit myself to you. You are exactly what I want, you are perfect. You have no faults that are a problem to me. You are ideal.” Humbly the spouse answers, “Yes, I know. I feel the same about you.” It is this romantic stage that drives us forward to be with that person all the time, to make promises and commitments. Some people enjoy this stage so much that they go through life searching to repeat the experience of this stage over and over again.

Most romantic movies and novels describe this stage of a relationship. We get the impression that this stage is the only stage we should experience and when we get married, this romantic stage will simply go on uninterrupted.

2. Bargaining stage

In this stage you wake up one morning and say, “Boy, you sure are not perfect. I’ll tell you what... I will change if you will!” ... and so the marital tug of war begins. This is where we feel frightened, disappointed and wonder if we have made a mistake. We realize that marriage is give-and-take so we take a deep breath and begin to negotiate changes that will “keep the romance alive.” At this stage the mask begins to come off and the real person begins to emerge: not just bad things become visible, but things you did not know or forgot to ask. Now the intensity of feeling is perceived (i.e. “I didn’t know my mother bothered you that much”).

3. Coercive stage

If the gentle bargaining, “You know I don’t like it when you smoke in the house,” does not work, the real hard-ball game begins. Now the partner says, “Boy do you have faults! I am going to change you and if I cannot then I am going to get God to change you.” At this point all kinds of prayers go up to God, “Please God, do something about that slob/witch I am living with.”

The coercive stage arrives when one spouse realizes that they do not have the ability to change their partner. At this point they go out and enlist the help of others (God, mom, friends, the preacher) in order to change them.

4. Desperation stage

In the desperation stage you say and think things like, “You are useless and hopeless. You are a rock that I cannot lift, even God cannot change you. There is no use trying anymore, I want out (if not in reality, in my head). I give up because you cannot change.” Hopefully by this point you get help and you may reach the next stage.

5. Acceptance stage

At this point your attitude should be, “Well, I realize that we both have faults. I will try to accept yours if you will be patient with mine.” Accepting is realizing that the romantic stage was a stage built on less than all the information or all the *accurate* information about the other. The interesting thing about this process is that if a couple gets to the

acceptance stage, much of the romance returns to their relationship but without the idealism. *Romantic realism*, a romance based on what is real, not what is made up or idealized.

As couples go through the stages and these types of emotions, this question always surfaces, “Marriage or Divorce?” If we think we have made a mistake, think the other will not change, begin to believe that they are impossible, then the divorce option seems like an easy and effective solution.

Those who have experienced divorce and those who work with people who are going through or on the other side of divorce will tell you that divorce is never an easy solution for several reasons:

1. **Divorce creates as many new problems and situations as it solves old ones.** Custody arrangements for the kids; hassles over money and property; the list goes on and on.
2. **Divorce hurts financially.** Only movie stars get rich with divorce. The rest of us are worse off financially because the same pool of money now has to support more houses, people and lawyers.
3. **Divorce hurts emotionally.** Divorce gets them out of your house but not out of your life. They are there emotionally through memories and family. They are there financially. They are there socially through friends, at weddings, funerals, etc. They bring their new partners with them into your life and sometimes you have to deal with these as well.
4. **Divorce hurts spiritually.** Because divorce is a sin, it creates guilt and guilt is a heavy burden on the soul. Unlike other sins, divorce is the type of sin that is not easily remedied, and the guilt (even after one asks and receives forgiveness) is still felt long afterwards. Even those who are victims in divorce (innocent spouses and children) feel guilty about the experience and are often unable to shake the feeling of low self-esteem, anger and sorrow.
5. **Divorce hurts socially.** The movies show divorce in a glamorous light at times: *First Wives Club* getting even and the

girls having a good time. Divorced guys getting back into the single scene with plenty of women and fun. Divorce parties.

Reality shows a different picture, however. Women, struggling alone with children to care for and having little energy to date or find another mate. Immature men, repeating the cycle of shallow relationships and regretting the loss of their families.

Divorced spouses, bitter, hurt, angry and isolated because they are no longer “a couple.”

There is no social advantage or business advantage in divorce. Even if you did your best, people consider divorce a failure and many times the victim suffers as much or more than the guilty party.

I do not mean to paint a picture that suggests that divorce is inevitable, only that it is an option that more people are taking advantage of without realizing the difficult consequences.

Marriage as an option

Of course, the other option as one goes through the various stages of marriage is to stay married. The question that arises when one is faced with the choice, marriage, or divorce, is “why?” Why stay married? It is hard; I do not like it; she will not change; I am not happy, etc. In answer to the question why, I offer the following answers:

1. Consider the other option

People divorce because they think that the sum total of what they will gain will be greater than what they have. This is not the case in most instances. In French we say, “Ça change le mal de place,” you change the location of the pain (you don’t eliminate the pain). Obviously for some, divorce has turned out to be good. An unfaithful or abusive mate has left and after the pain you have been able to start over. But divorce is not always this clean or easy. Many times it is better to heal the pain altogether rather than shifting it around.

2. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16)

Sexual sin and divorce are condemned by God (Hebrews 13:4). Those who have no faith, no fear of God or no desire to please the Lord do not consider this idea, but they will be judged because of it and their conscience secretly suffers. Counseling offices are full of people who are dealing with guilt and do not understand why.

Jesus condemns those who divorce unrighteously in Matthew 19 and Mark 10:11-13. We will deal with these passages and these issues in our next chapter but for now suffice to say that one major reason not to divorce is because God forbids it and will punish those who are guilty of divorcing without just cause. God hates divorce because of the broken promise and what it causes: sorrow, guilt, and sadness.

3. You made a covenant

Marriage is not sex or living together or having children, all these come and go in life. The basis of a marriage is a covenant between two people to remain husband and wife no matter what, and the covenant gives us permission to be “one.”

God’s experience with Israel is the model for covenant. He made a covenant with them for better or for worse, that He would be their God and they, His people. Historically we saw that Israel had both good and bad times with the Lord (David and Solomon, good. Ahab and Jezebel, bad). Throughout these times God remained faithful because of the covenant, not the condition of the people.

When we take our wedding vows, what we are promising is to relate to each other just as God related to Israel. The wedding vows would be more realistic if they were stated thus: “I take you as my lawfully wedded spouse with the full knowledge that you are weak and sinful as I am weak and sinful in many ways, but despite all of this I commit myself to loving you and being faithful to only you till death do us part.”

When the covenant is the basis of marriage and there are problems, the couple has a way to work out these problems. They can strip the relationship down to its basic covenant in order to rebuild and repair what needs to be fixed in their marriage. Without a covenant based marriage, there is no reason to remain married when things go wrong so

divorce seems like a good option. The answer to “why not” when contemplating divorce is “...because of the covenant, that’s why not.”

EXERCISE

Take the time to write up a Covenant of Marriage with your spouse based on what you have learned so far in this book. Let this be a project that you work on together. Once completed, use it as a basis to renew your marriage vows. Once done, store the document with your important papers such as your will or passport. At each wedding anniversary read this document in order to remind yourselves of the basis upon which your marriage has been sealed.

9.

REMARRIAGE & RENEWAL

This is a chapter on a sensitive subject that may be difficult for some for various reasons:

- Some may disagree with me on various ideas and conclusions.
- Some may have to relive personal situations that were painful.
- There may be some who realize they are wrong and have to make adjustments.
- Many may simply be relieved to learn that certain things they just knew to be true in their hearts, have finally been proven so Biblically.
- Others may see weaknesses in their relationships that might take time to fix.

Whatever your feelings, I hope that this chapter will help you grow, widen your knowledge, increase your love for yourself and for those who struggle with marriage, with divorce or with remarriage, and increase your love for God who sees us through every stage.

This chapter is entitled “Remarriage and Renewal,” it addresses the concerns that people who are in subsequent marriages, or those who are about to remarry, have. After all, these brethren want to succeed in these marriages too, they want to avoid divorce as well. People who have suffered through a divorce never want to go through it again.

In my ministry, I have taught at length about marriage and divorce and what I believe the Bible teaches on this subject: that marriage is between a man and a woman for life; that divorce is a sin and if not repented of, will damn the soul to hell, just like any other sin; that adultery and divorce can be repented of and forgiven, and those guilty of it, forgiven and renewed. The Prodigal Son in Luke 15 received renewal with all rights and privileges returned to him because with forgiveness comes renewal.

I do not believe that dissolving legally contracted marriages, whether they are the second or the tenth, is the way to achieve proper repentance. Repentance requires an acknowledgement of the sin (putting away, breaking the covenant) and a change of heart concerning the things that led to this sin.

When reconciliation is possible, I always encourage it but when other marriages have been contracted after the divorce, I believe the best course of action is to follow Paul's teaching in such matters: "Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called." (I Corinthians 7:20) Getting remarried does not remove God from our lives. Marriage, by its very nature, is a call to God to help us live in the way He has designed us to live: one man with one woman. Those who remarry have failed at this and are trying to do it right. To these I give the following advice.

1. You are really married

Some think that subsequent marriages are not the real thing: they are not godly marriages; they are not as good as the first ones; God is displeased, and He will not help you. Some actually think that subsequent marriages are adultery! These thoughts are based on the idea that marriages cannot be dissolved, and before God, you are always married to your first spouse as long as they are alive.

I explained to you that death dissolves a marriage in a righteous way (Romans 7), divorce dissolves a marriage in an unrighteous way. Either way, the marriage is dissolved. The Bible never calls subsequent marriages adultery.

The indissolubility of marriage is a Roman Catholic idea begun at the Council of Trent in 1545. The teaching was that only God could marry or unmarry you.

Subsequent (second or more) marriages are not first marriages, but they are marriages in God's eyes as well as society's eyes. God will help you with them if you ask. Society (this includes family) must respect what God respects and honors. Jesus tells us to forgive seventy times seven, surely God can forgive one failed marriage and help a person get it right (if they are willing) the second or third time?

When you are legally married you are bound by man and God to be faithful, to do your best to succeed in remaining married until death do you part, because you are really married to this and only this one person, whether that is a first or second marriage.

2. Your marriage is perfect through the cross

If you were a non-Christian and divorced and remarried, you would be legally married to the second person, but your soul would be charged with the sin of adultery because of your divorce. When a person divorces without cause, the sin they commit is called adultery. Even if you're legally divorced and remarried ten times, each time the sin of adultery would be charged to your soul. At death, the world would bury a much married person but hold nothing against you because all was done legally (that is what the Pharisees did). God, however, would condemn you to hell because you would be guilty of adultery, not because you remarried but because you divorced without cause.

The person who becomes a Christian, even though he may be divorced and remarried, is forgiven for his adultery and thus made perfect in God's sight. The Christian who divorces and repents is also forgiven for his sin of adultery. Many find this hard to accept, but God's grace does not make a distinction about which sins to forgive or not. Repentance requires a change of heart and a change of attitude but what makes the person perfect in God's sight is not how he or she was able to fix his former marriage; it is not how well he succeeds in his subsequent marriage (repentance requires that he try).

Perfection is a free gift given to a person who believes in Jesus and expresses that belief in repentance, baptism and faithful living (Acts 2:37-42).

Regardless of your marital status, God doesn't make you perfect through your relative success at marriage, he perfects you through your faith in Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 1:30-31).

3. Follow the Bible's advice for a person who is remarried

I know that there is not a chapter in the Bible addressed to people who are remarried. But there is a lot of advice for people who have failed, and is that not what divorce and remarriage are all about? Weak and sinful people who have failed at a complex and demanding relationship and who are trying again. Why is it that we are so gracious to those who have failed at telling the truth, failed at believing in Jesus, failed at not killing other people, but we lack so much compassion for those who have failed at marriage? God is kind and patient towards all those who fail and are willing, with His help, to try again. To these, He provides help and advice in His Word.

BASIC ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO FAIL

A. Forget the past

The past is where the failure is, where the pain is. Let the past go. If a person is forgiven by God, they can then forgive themselves and turn away from the past. Dwelling on what happened, what might have been done differently and why it all happened will not change the past, it will only keep the past alive in the present. This goes for the guilty party as well as the victims of a failed marriage.

Trying to fix the past by punishing ourselves, punishing our ex-partner or bargaining with God only manages to delay healing. Some people do not want to heal because constant pain is their way of trying to atone for their past failure in marriage. If they heal they have nothing to offer their conscience or God and are afraid of punishment.

Paul, in speaking of his former life and the terrible failure in it, says, "...forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ." (Philippians 3:13-14) Paul had been forgiven and the way that he forgave himself was to refuse to dwell on the failure he had been absolved of and concentrate on the future that God had freely offered him.

Forgetting the past is not only a healthy thing to do, it is the ongoing way that we express our faith to God. Forgetting the past says, "I believe you have forgiven me, and I focus on you, Lord, and not on my failure."

B. Learn from the past

The past is there, the failure (whether it is our fault, someone else's or a mixture of both) is there, it is history and there are many reminders of it. The key is not to whine about the past, or dwell or mourn over it, but to use it by learning from it.

Repentance is a change of heart. The past helps us understand what we need to do in order to repent. Knowing the past helps us to know what we contributed to the failure and what we need to change, control, improve, eliminate, or replace.

The past usually shows us that our failure was due to the fact that we did it our way. Repentance means that in the future we are going to do it God's way.

Many second marriages fail because the people (guilty or innocent) enter into them with the same attitude that they had in the first. Many fail because many issues remain unresolved and they end up beating up their second spouses for things their original spouses did. This is why second marriages fail at the same rate that the first ones do.

My advice to divorced people is to get counseling so that they can learn from the past (who they are, why they failed, etc.) before entering into another serious relationship. Getting married again does not solve the problems from the first marriage; they need to be solved before getting married again because subsequent marriages bring a whole new set of problems. If you have learned something from the past, you will be better equipped to deal with the future.

C. Let your life and change be a witness for Christ

Paul the Apostle often began his sermons with the story of his conversion: how a person who despised Christians grew to love the church so much that he was ready to die for it.

If you base your marriage on Biblical principles; if you live your life as a faithful and fruitful Christian; if people see that it is possible to take a failed life, a failed marriage, and through Jesus Christ build a new life and a new and wonderful marriage, God will be glorified!

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

- Matthew 5:16

A loving relationship and a Christian home are good works, even if they are produced by a subsequent marriage. They will honor God and provide a witness for the power of Christ in your life.

SUMMARY

Jesus came to save, to build, to encourage and to equip; not to judge, punish and criticize.

God is interested in renewal and regeneration. This is true in marriage as well as every other area of our lives.

10.

BLENDED FAMILIES – PART 1

Everyone either knows or has experienced some of the challenges of what we call “blended families.”

Blended families have always been with us. In Genesis chapter 30 we read about Jacob, his two wives, sons and daughters who present an early picture of difficulties within a home where there was not an original mom and dad along with the children belonging to just these two. In these early years the most common form of blending were polygamist marriages; however, blended marriages as a result of divorce or being widowed have always been common.

Today we have a variety of “blended” families. There are subsequent marriages where children are brought together from different unions; single parents with children from different partners; grandparents raising grandchildren; multigenerational families where parents live with their children, or relatives; families who add adoptive or abandoned children to their household. There are probably other combinations, but these are the main ones. Blended families present additional challenges to the ones that already exist for conventional families.

These next three chapters will try to give some insights and Biblical guidelines to help these families find unity, strength, greater love and commitment to each other and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although there are many varieties of blended families, the most common is the one created by a subsequent (meaning second or more)

marriage where children get new parents and vice versa. Our study will use this model and from this I hope you will apply the principles to whatever situation you are in or you are referring to.

Laying a Foundation

In a study of individuals who had recently gone through a divorce in a first marriage, the following reasons were given for the failure in order of importance:

1. Immaturity of partner (were not ready)
2. Sexual difficulties (sex before or outside marriage)
3. Lack of marriage preparation (psychological or emotional)
4. In-law interference
5. Values conflict (religion, etc.)
6. Problems adjusting to married life
7. Child rearing disagreements
8. Finances

In a related study of the main reason for divorce in second and third marriages, note how the order (not the type) of problems changes.

1. Child rearing disagreements
2. Financial pressure
3. Relatives (all the different ones)
4. Value conflict
5. Sharing of tasks

Because child rearing becomes so complicated in blended families, those who are presently unmarried (Biblical term for divorced or widowed) or who are in a single state should consider four principles that should be understood before going into this situation. These are based on Paul's admonition to the Philippians to "Let go the past and prepare for the future."

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 3:13-14

In practical terms, Paul's advice can be applied to those in blended families in the following ways.

1. Know your mate and their children

When unmarried people begin a relationship, they tend to focus their attention on each other and assume that the child-rearing dimension needs only to be considered after marriage. Dating for the unmarried is not like dating for singles.

Dating for the unmarried involves the learning of a whole family system and network and allowing them to know you. So many unmarried people are looking for the lighthearted and romantic experience of their single days and feel annoyed or overburdened because dating a family is not that easy. Others make the mistake of leaving one relationship (even as the victim) and rushing into another without ever analyzing and acknowledging what they contributed to the failure of the previous marriage (they either blame themselves too much or too little). Still others remarry for reasons of loneliness, insecurity or to provide a parent for their children, and end up regretting it.

The reason to marry is because you have found someone that you want to give yourself to and receive the same from. This giving and receiving is always the same whether it is the first or second marriage. However, in a second marriage it requires more effort to get to know the person you want to give yourself to.

The first step, therefore, is to take the time (lots of time) to get to know the person and their children (because they come as a package) and let them get to know the real you (not just the nice front you present to make everybody feel good). Date the whole family as a group and individually, when proper and possible, so you can know them.

2. Understand your future children's needs

Children are not good at verbalizing their needs or explaining their feelings. They act out. Many times, their legitimate concerns, fears and questions may come out as an attack or negative and destructive behavior.

Children are an important part of the equation in a second marriage and their concerns must be addressed, even anticipated, so they can be integrated into the new relationship. Questions such as:

- How often will I see my mom or dad?
- Where am I going to live?
- Will I see my grandma and grandpa?
- What will my last name be?
- Will Uncle Charlie still be my uncle?
- Will dad or mom come to my ballgames?
- Will you have time for me?
- Where will “my space” be?

It is wise to answer these questions over and over again (even after the marriage has taken place) so that children feel part of the process and have a sense of security even if the variables in their life change.

3. Build a new relationship

Remarried couples often “assume” that they know about marriage and relationships so they can just “run with it” when they get remarried. Every relationship is different in its needs and expectations. For those entering subsequent marriages there needs to be an understanding that building a successful marriage is not any easier just because you have been married before.

Single parenting is lonely and difficult, and many think that when the opportunity to remarry comes along, it is the answer to all the problems. They do not realize that remarrying will create new challenges as well.

It is important to take the time and be ready to start from square one in order to build a strong and lifetime relationship with a new partner. It is also wise to accept the fact that this new person does not represent all the answers to the problems created by a previous relationship. They will bring some new questions and issues too.

4. Include everyone in the wedding

A book on blended families tells the story of a boy who went away for the weekend and when he returned, his mom introduced him to his new dad... recipe for disaster!

The marriage ceremony for blended families should reflect the nature of their family situation and celebrate this idea. Children should be included and encouraged to have input. If they feel part of the union from the very beginning, it will help deal with issues later on.

Now that we have had a brief look at some of the issues that need to be addressed before one enters a blended family situation, let us look at some key goals that blended families have a harder time in achieving than nuclear families (original mom, dad, and kids).

GOAL OF UNITY

Every family wants to be united, close and in harmony, but for a blended family this goal is especially difficult. The problem with unity issues is first accepting that blended families are not nuclear families, they are a combination of two separate families. This means that there are two histories, two sets of kids (at times), two established ways of doing and seeing things that have to be blended together to arrive at unity.

In order to achieve unity, here are some basic things that have to be dealt with in the blended family:

1. Avoid the co-conductor system

(Imagine a symphony orchestra with two conductors)

When people remarry with children from one or more households, the great danger is to have two families living under one roof. Long time single parents or divorced people with children are used to their own system (for discipline, for family rituals, for the use of money, etc.).

When they remarry the temptation is to try to maintain these independent styles or integrate the styles instead of reestablishing a single new system for everyone.

Of course, God's word provides invaluable information in describing the basic role of each member of the family.

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

- Ephesians 5:22 – 6:4

This helps everyone know that the family system is based on a principle higher than just what they are used to or what has taken place before. The new family is now going to follow God's system for the family.

2. Giving up previous roles

The hardest thing about seeking unity is giving up our previous role in the former family, or the family system established after the first marriage dissolved. Single moms become the head of the house. Children sometimes lose their “place” in the order of things (the oldest becomes the second oldest, etc.). Bachelors who marry women with kids are no longer responsible only for themselves.

In a blended family it is wise to examine each person’s present role and see how it will change in the new situation. Adults find it difficult to give up sole “parenting” rights; kids find it traumatic to have to share their rooms and TV (not to mention their parents) with strangers. Knowing and discussing these things in advance helps.

3. Establish ground rules

Nuclear families grow naturally from one stage to another. Blended families are grafted together from existing pieces. One advantage blended families have, however, is that they can discuss and agree in advance about the type of home and relationship they wish to have with each other and establish ground rules to help reach their goals. Establishing, agreeing, and following the ground rules are important in creating unity in a blended family situation. Here are a few basic rules that will work for any family:

- **Courtesy.** Kind words, politeness, consideration in treating each other is the norm.
- **Establish one set of family rules.** About the car, TV, curfew, discipline, etc. When everybody knows the rules, then they are easier to follow and enforce.
- **Fairness in disputes.** Blended families have a lot of “turf” wars and parents need to deal fairly with all members. Usually this means that not everybody gets what they want all the time.
- **Division of labor.** Have everyone pitch in to make the household work. When everyone works, everyone feels part of the home and this breeds unity.

- **Pursue spiritual goals.** When the entire family knows that their life is based on faith in God, and the family begins to exercise a spiritual life together (worship, prayer, service, study), they will become united.

Blended families cannot unite because of their past or present situation but if, as Paul says, they are reaching forward to what lies ahead (heaven, eternal life with God through Christ) they will find unity.

Again, as Paul says,

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Galatians 3:26

In the end, the blended family will only find its true identity and unity in the name and service of Jesus Christ. Only He can heal the wounds and make the two into one again.

11.

BLENDED FAMILIES – PART 2

In the first chapter on blended families, we reviewed the major causes for divorce in second marriages and saw that child-rearing and family related problems were near the top of the list of causes for divorce. This is why much of the counseling for blended families centers on integrating the whole family and not just the two individuals who are getting married.

I shared some ways to prepare for a subsequent marriage: know your future mate and children; pay attention to children's special needs; build a new relationship; include everyone in the wedding.

We also talked about ways of achieving the unity necessary for any family to succeed but especially difficult for blended families to arrive at: avoid co-conductor system; give up old roles; establish ground rules.

Finally, we saw that true unity in any family can only be achieved through Jesus Christ. The Lord can heal and bring together a blended family into one single unit under His Lordship.

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Galatians 3:26-28

Let us continue in this series with more discussion on the child's reaction to a blended family situation and how to deal with it, especially as a stepparent.

CHILDREN'S REACTION

Since much of the success of blended families rides on how well the children are integrated and accept the new situation, it is important to discuss how they react to the blending of a family.

A. Grieving children

When a family falls apart for whatever reason, children mourn and, like any period of mourning, they go through a grieving cycle for not only the parent they have lost but also for all of the family times and lifestyle that they once knew (whether good or bad).

For children, the grieving process is exactly the same as for adults except it is worked out in a new environment, the blended family:

1. Denial. Children have a hard time accepting the finality of divorce. This sometimes motivates them to sabotage the new marriage because they do not accept it (behavior, rejection, indifference). Denial is tough because kids do not tend to talk things out. The best way is to lovingly point out the truth of the new situation and give them time to adjust.

2. Anger. When children realize that dad is not coming back or that this is the new mom, the new home, there is an angry reaction. Kids take it out on teachers, siblings, self, even parents. If possible, the biological and stepparent need to help the child get in touch with his feelings and identify what he is angry about, trying to match the feeling with the cause.

3. Bargaining. This is where individuals will try to manipulate people or events to change the past. In divorce, the children dream about the parents getting back together again and may suggest it. Do not give children false hope, let them go through this stage at their own pace and help them understand that this family is the family that will now be permanently established, there is no going back.

4. Depression. The roller-coaster nature of blended families is what leads to depression. In death, the loss is final. We get over the sadness and reminders and go on. In blended families the loss is always there and your children are reminded of it every other weekend. Eventually the loss is mourned out when new relations take hold in the blended family and children resolve feelings about biological parents and create new and meaningful relationships with them (when possible). If they are unavailable, this is very difficult.

5. Acceptance. Acceptance is the realization that the blended family is not a nuclear family. It is not my original family but it is a good family and there is a place in it for me where I am loved.

Peter says, "Love covers a multitude of sins." (I Peter 4:8) In blended families where there is faith and Christian love, the sins of the past are covered and a chance for a peaceful and joyful family experience is there for each member.

B. Development levels

Just as there are specific reactions of children to divorce and the re-forming of families, there are also specific needs of children at each age group when they find themselves in this situation:

0 to 2 years. Need a lot of touching and nurturing as a way of reassurance that everything is okay despite the changes.

3 to 5 years. Children at this stage are old enough to know that something is wrong but too young to process all the information. At this age kids have a short memory. It helps to explain things over and over again and be patient with regressive behavior. Allowing them to bring comforting objects to the new home helps.

6 to 12 years. This is the age group where there is a feeling of responsibility (it is my fault; I should try to bring them back) and/or a sense of adult grief. Do not use children this age as a sounding board for your own fears, anger, or blame, etc. Their fear is one of abandonment, powerlessness, and distrust (adults leave you, they cannot be trusted, etc.). They need to know that they are okay. Talk and encourage them, allow them to make small decisions for themselves, be kind to ex-

spouses and keep your promises. They have already been disappointed enough.

13 and up. Adolescents struggle with growing up in the most stable of nuclear families, so it is normal that in a blended one the problems are increased. The main issue is independence. In a nuclear family the issue is negotiated with biological parents to an eventual conclusion. With the blended family, teenagers have to cope with the independence issue and work it out with a single parent, work it out with new parents or work it out with the separated parent. In each case the rules are different, and the standards change. This leads to confusion and discouragement. The goal is one standard that all can agree to.

Children react, and children at different ages react and need different things. If a blended household is going to serve them (and not just the adults) as a home, the things mentioned here have to be taken into consideration.

LIFE IN TWO HOMES, PARENTING STYLES

At least when the divorce is finalized, the spouses no longer have to live with each other which, unfortunately, is not true for the children. Children of blended families have to learn to cope with living in two households when both parents want to share custody.

The responsibility for making this work belongs to both parents, not simply the custodial parents. The author of the book “Blended Families” describes some typical tactics.

The “**star**” parent. This is the parent who assumes that they are the better, more responsible parent and makes sure that the kids know it. This may be true, but stars need to realize that they need the other parent, even with their lesser skills, to provide some wholeness for their children.

The “**glue**” parent. Cannot let go. When kids are ready to leave for visiting, they are sent off with a picture of a parent who will worry and not live properly until they return safely. Glue parents only create anxiety in their children by showing their over-protection and distrust of the other parent.

The **“distant”** parent. The distant parent wants as little to do with the other parent as possible, so all communication is done through the children or on voice-mail. Schedules are off, there are mix-ups and missed dates as a result. There needs to be an understanding that the other person is not a mate but a parent.

The **“sometimes”** parent. This is the one who is there sometimes, but you are never sure when because they are only around sometimes, for whatever reason (there is always a reason). “Sometimes” should be there at the times that this type of behavior affects the emotional health of their children, this would motivate them to be there.

The **“ruthless”** parent. Still fighting, still getting even by putting down the ex-spouse, new partner, or sabotaging any chance of peace so they can keep the war going. Everyone here is hurt and, in the end, even “ruthless” will feel rejection from the ones manipulated because kids know what is going on.

The **“parent”** parent. Recognizes that the marriage is over but their role as parents are not. They strive to be good teammates with ex-spouse and new blended families even though it hurts. They do this for the love and happiness of their children.

Jesus said that true love is when we lay our lives down for others (John 15:13). This is what is needed.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THE WEEKEND “VISIT”

Visitation is a normal part of blended families’ routines that nuclear families rarely encounter. For example, his son comes over from his ex-wife’s home; his present wife’s daughters leave to visit their father.

Even though this might seem strange to a nuclear family, visitation and the peculiar challenges and problems attached need to be dealt with by blended households. Here are some helpful guidelines to make these run a bit more smoothly.

1. Take the initiative

If visiting children are left to arrive and flop in front of the TV or left to decide what to do, they will invariably be under-motivated (I am bored, I

am mad, I do not like it here) or over-demanding (let's go to Six Flags). Plan their visit, especially the first night. Something that has been planned out where the child is immersed immediately into the activity of the home will allow them to integrate more naturally and safely into the weekend and the family. There will be plenty of time to "veg" in front of the TV later on.

2. Provide structure

Even though yours is not the custodial home, it is a home and children will feel safer, happier and more integrated if they know and are expected to stay within the structure (mealtimes, bed times, preparation for church, etc.; includes proper conduct and dress). A visit is not a vacation, it is a time to experience the "life" of the other parent and share a bond with them. This is more easily done in a structured environment, and one that is consistent from visit to visit.

3. Be accepting

Receiving visits from non-custodial children is not like a visit from a friend or an aunt. You are offering more than hospitality; you are offering an "equal" place in your family for a limited time. Children who visit need to feel that they are important and have the same rights and protections as the other children, as well as the same advantages.

4. Provide a home, not just a room

Visiting children will accept the situation as well as the other family if they are given their "own space" in the home. The goal is to help them deal with the loss of their nuclear family and its dreams. This can be done by reassuring them that they have ownership in the new home and family that has been established by the non-custodial parent. The parent and the new spouse need to help the child know and develop relationships with other children and institutions in the neighborhood.

5. Give them permission to love

Parents (biological and custodial) feel threatened when their children are showing more love or loyalty to the other parent or set of parents. This is especially true when the custodial parent feels the "weekend"

parent is cheating by buying their child's love with leniency or gifts. Making snide remarks, suggesting that the other parent is unworthy of love, only confuses them into thinking that they do not have permission to love those important to them! Granting them permission to love enables children to mature emotionally and work out these issues in their lives. They will eventually figure out who did what. If you make them choose sides, you stunt their growth and create resentment.

6. Help smooth out transitions

Arriving and leaving can be emotional moments. Try to understand and deal with these accordingly. Children tend to withdraw at departure in order to lessen the pain. Do not see this as rejection or a sign that they did not enjoy themselves. Send them off with love and assurance that you look forward to next time. Try to resolve conflicts before they leave. Realize that when they come home, they have been in a different, not better or worse, world. Do not snoop or inquire. Share your time first, give them space and welcome them happily.

Visitation is not the best way to parent, but not an impossible way to parent.

12.

BLENDED FAMILIES – PART 3

This is the last chapter in this sub-section on blended families. It does not cover all the material in this book, just some of the main issues. So far we have focused on the most common type of blended family, those produced by subsequent marriages.

Some important ideas: remarriage involves integration of two families not just two people; care should be given to children's condition, fears and needs, allowing them to grieve and recognizing that children of different ages have different needs when a blended family is formed.

In this final chapter on blended families, we will look at some of the other challenges faced by those who find themselves in blended families (as children) or about to enter into this situation through marriage or some other life change.

I do not want to give the impression that the only things connected to blended families are problems and challenges, but many times people enter into these situations and they are not ready or aware that these are the very real issues that they will have to face.

STEPPING IN AS A STEPPARENT

Parenting is a difficult job under the best of circumstances, but when you have to parent a child that is not your own, the degree of difficulty increases considerably.

- The difficulty of parenting around visitation schedules
- The problems associated with parenting his or her children
- Interference from the ex's and their families
- Rejection from the children themselves
- Indecision of your spouse to allow you to fully parent their child
- Lack of any parenting experience

These are just some of the problems that the stepparent faces in a blended family situation.

When faced with these challenges the one thing for new step- parents to remember is the original reason for being there in the first place, the love of their partner. When things get difficult and confusing, the motivating factor needs to be the original love for the spouse. That love makes it all work somehow.

Aside from this love however, stepparents need to realize that there will be some significant changes that have to take place in their new position. Doing so helps to sort out many of the problems.

1. Stepping in from the outside

Stepparents are strangers who step in from the outside of life to the very core of life. Many times, one partner moves into the home of the other, that means that this person has not only entered a house but stepped into memories, special traditions, in-jokes and ways to do things, etc. For stepparents this may mean a certain time is needed to learn the history, language and rhythm of the home and family; it takes time to learn about relatives, routines, and memories (pictures and home movies).

This can make a stepparent feel like an outsider. Even if the family buys a new house, there are still plenty of reminders of the old life. It is

important to know about the past but also create memories of the new family so they can be added to the old. Get a camera and start “making memories” and change some of the family pictures on the wall to include you.

2. Stepping into a new role

Stepparents do not have a positive image. It is difficult to break the stereotypes of stepparents: no experience, intruder, mean (Cinderella).

Partners give confusing and mixed messages: sometimes my partner asks me to act like a parent and take the initiative; sometimes my partner tells me to just be a stepparent and check things out with them first; sometimes my partner just wants me to butt out because this matter deals with “her” children. And yet, the stepparent is expected to love their stepchildren as if they were their own.

The answer for stepparents is not to try to re-create the role or style of the biological parent, but rather to develop the style and character of our heavenly Father who is the model for parents both male and female. A few of His qualities are:

Gracious love

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.
- John 3:16

Fairness

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him;
- Romans 10:12

Attentiveness

Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

- Luke 12:6-7

Discipline

And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,

Nor faint when you are reproved by Him;

- Hebrews 12:5

The parents may change but what makes a good and Godly parent always remains the same.

3. Stepping into new responsibilities

Some think that parenting is simply providing food, clothing, education and discipline. Parents and stepparents are responsible for these but are also responsible for attitudes that children develop as well:

A. Attitude toward marriage itself

Children in blended families may not be optimistic about marriage since they have seen one fail. Parents need to instill a positive and hopeful attitude about marriage and teach children about God's plan for marriage contained in the Bible.

B. Attitude toward self-worth

Blended families have suffered setbacks and major adjustments. These usually take a toll on a child's sense of worth. An important task for stepparents is to help children feel good about themselves. They need to provide encouragement and positive reinforcement for the things that they do well and the good qualities you perceive in them.

C. Attitude toward life itself

Children who lose parents tend to see life in terms of this one major event. They assume that life is not going to treat them right because it has let them down in a big way already. Step- parents can help show them how to take these defeats and turn them into successes, thus making them stronger. The more the blended family succeeds, the more the child has proof that good can come from bad.

D. Attitude towards God

The best gift a stepparent can bring into the new family is a strong faith and commitment to serve God. This may not be easy because the family may not be where you are. When this happens you have to show them Christ and what His presence can do for them.

If the stepparent has no religious convictions but the new family does, the gift is reversed.

In either case, do not abandon the Lord for the new parent or family; bring them to the Lord.

4. Stepping into new relationships

The hardest part of stepparenting is developing simultaneous relationships with people who are not just potential friends that you can take or leave if you do not like them. In stepparenting you have to develop relationships with people who have become your family, people you cannot just ignore or give up on if it does not “click.”

The source book provides eight steps to developing relationships in a blended family:

Step 1

Accept the fact that you are a stepparent.

Because it is a blended family there are limits on time, limits on history, limits on finances, etc. But there is no limit on love and respect. The relationship of the past is limited, accept that, but the future relationship is limitless, work on this instead.

Step 2

Educate yourself. Parenting is a learned skill.

Most learn about child rearing from their parents and the day-to-day experience of bringing up their own children from birth. Stepparents have to take over from a fixed point. This is difficult but not impossible. They need to ask questions, read books, and consult others who are in the same boat. A stepparent can organize a group to help others and share what they have learned. The more one knows, the better able they are to form more satisfying relationships with their blended family.

Step 3

Do not assume.

Do not think you know how to parent. You may have parented your kids, but you have not parented these kids. Learn about their history and needs, and work towards understanding them.

Step 4

Set objectives.

You cannot tell how you are doing in the family unless you set objectives:

- School objectives
- Recreational objectives
- Church related objectives
- Personal objectives
(e.g. to be able to settle arguments without yelling)

It is encouraging when we are able to measure individual and group objectives as a family.

Step 5

Be flexible yet firm.

Firm in the sense that you mean what you say and say what you mean. Firm in the sense that there are rules and expectations. Flexible in that you know there are exceptions and that circumstances and lifestyle changes may cause you to reevaluate earlier decisions and rules. This

type of attitude enables children to feel secure and encourages them to have open and honest discussions with you.

Step 6

Market yourself.

In most cases the kids would rather have the old parent instead of you. You need to “sell” yourself a little to show that you want their approval and that their acceptance of you is important. It is discouraging to them if your attitude is that your position as parent has exclusively been decided by their other parent. If you are too demanding, they may see the price of accepting you is too high and be discouraged. If you do not demand anything and you do not ask for respect (let’s be buddies), then they will not see your value to the family.

Show them your worth and desire to do a good job as a parent and loving spouse to their other parent and they will eventually come to accept and value you as an equal partner in the family; not the same as the parent who is gone but an equal part of the family that now exists.

Step 7

Exercise forgiveness.

There may be things said and done (especially at the beginning) that will be hurtful. Learn to forgive.

The ability to forgive unenthusiastic children, your parents who think you are crazy to marry into this family, your ex, your partner’s ex, your in-laws (all of them), yourself (for not being and doing all you want to do) will tear down walls, heal wounds and show the beautiful spirit of Christ to your new family.

Step 8

Learn to laugh.

Laughter is a balm and a tremendous bonding exercise. Friendships are born when two people laugh together. Learn to laugh at yourself and encourage your partner to laugh at your failings and then press on. Solomon says laughter is medicine for the soul.

SUMMARY

In the end it is the grace of God that has either:

- Supported you while you mourned a dead spouse
- Forgiven you for failing at a marriage that has left you as a single person or single parent
- Strengthened you to go through the ordeal of being left by an unfaithful spouse
- Brought you to the point where you find yourself in a blended family situation

In all of these situations and more, God's grace has been with you to keep you sane, keep you going and keep you saved.

If you are in a new family, that same grace will enable you to find joy and peace as well as opportunities to serve the Lord and honor God with the family He now has grafted together for your edification.

Have faith, do your best and depend on the Lord for all your needs and cares. God bless all of our families and whether they are nuclear or blended, make sure the Lord Jesus is the Lord of your home.

RESOURCE

For more information on this topic, I recommend the source book used for this section entitled, "The Blended Family" by Tom and Adrienne Frydenger.

13.

KEEPING YOUR SPOUSE HAPPY

I think Peter the Apostle was a happy husband and he must have had a happy wife because he writes so knowingly about the formula for a happy marriage. I believe he was inspired by the Holy Spirit in his writing, but I suspect much of what he wrote about concerning relationships was true in his own marriage.

In I Peter 3, he writes about the things that couples need to do in order to keep each other happy.

HAPPY HUSBANDS

He begins by speaking to wives about keeping their husbands happy and mentions 3 basic things:

1. Assume a role that is pleasing to him

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,
- I Peter 3:1

Submissive wives make for happy husbands. Submission is a military term meaning 'to place oneself under.' This is not popular in today's culture.

Everyone in life has to submit to a higher authority, that is a fact of life without which there is no peace. Within the context of marriage, God has given the leadership role to the man (whether Christian or not) and one of the wife's goals in marriage is to help the man assume and exercise this role properly.

A problem occurs when a "strong" woman takes over from a "weak" man rather than helping him lead. This role does not mean that one is superior to the other, only that each has different functions. One of the most frequent complaints of non-believing husbands is a Christian wife who uses her faith to hijack his authority where there is no moral or spiritual conflict. A wife who is truly submissive is a joy to her husband and an incentive for him to assume his own role as a man.

2. Develop attitudes that make him happy

as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.
- 1 Peter 3:2

A CHASTE ATTITUDE MAKES HIM HAPPY.

This means sexually pure in word, dress, and action. Chastity is an attitude that you have in everything you say and do.

We are free to express our sexuality with our spouses in any way we choose, but as free as we are with our partners, we are exclusive and private with others. Provocative dressing, careless affection, intimate gestures, and exchanges with others do not build a husband's trust.

Let's face it, men are easily provoked to jealousy (it is not a quality) but a wise woman (a chaste one) will recognize this and build an attitude of trust in her husband. A man is happy with a wife who is recognized as chaste by other men.

A RESPECTFUL WIFE MAKES HIM HAPPY.

Peter describes a woman who is restrained in words and actions. One who is dignified. It is an attitude in a wife that is marked by discretion, prudence, and wisdom in her opinions, decisions, and the way she acts.

A man is happy to have a wife that doesn't make a fool of herself or of him with her words, emotions, or actions. A lot of women try to change their husbands when they should really be working on developing chaste and respectful behavior themselves.

You never change a man by gossiping about his weaknesses to your friends or putting him down in front of his friends - that is undignified.

3. Cultivate an appearance that makes him happy

Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.
- I Peter 3:3-6

In the beginning men are attracted by what they see on the outside, but to build a happy marriage he must continue to be drawn to what he sees on the inside. This passage doesn't mean that it is wrong to look good on the outside, Peter is simply saying that it isn't the outside that makes you beautiful, it is the inside.

This internal beauty God sees inside of women consists of:

1. A gentle and quiet spirit. This means not to be proud or stubborn. God works on this proud and stubborn spirit by asking women to submit to their husbands. Nothing creates a humble spirit more effectively than having to submit to an imperfect man. God doesn't want women to submit to their husbands because their husbands are

somehow better than they are; He asks this as a demonstration of love to him and to maintain order in the family. A gentle and quiet spirit is beautiful, right before God and makes a husband happy.

2. Doing what is right. Being a righteous person in family relations, in business, in church - to seek and do the right thing, this is also beautiful to behold. For example, I can always count on my wife to want to do the right thing - this is her most beautiful quality.

3. No Fear. Not afraid because, like Sarah, a woman's faith is in God not herself or her husband, or her abilities. Not afraid because she is ready to meet evil, failure, disappointment, even death with the assurance that Christ will be with her at all times.

The appearance that makes him happy begins with a pleasing exterior but will only last if the interior is cultivated as well.

SUMMARY I

Peter gives wives three very specific ways to make their husbands happy:

1. Be submissive to him. Care about it. Learn what submission means, discuss it with him. I challenge wives to ask their husbands how they could be more submissive to them.
2. Cultivate attitude of chastity and respect. Ask him if he thinks you are or how you can change to be more so.
3. Concentrate on the inner woman rather than the outer one. Invest more time in spiritual exercises, study, doing good works - these will beautify you in God's eyes and his eyes too.

HAPPY WIVES

Peter was a happy husband because he knew how to make his wife happy. He goes on in I Peter 3:7 to give some basic ideas on how to make your wife happy: only one verse for the guys because they have a short attention span!

1. Live with your wife

You husbands in the same way, live with your wives
- I Peter 3:7a

Some husbands think that living with their wives means sharing the same bed and house with them legally. The word "with" here means closely aligned to, settled with. The mistake that many men make is that they become passive in their marriage:

- My job is the office, the church, the shop
- Your job is the home, the kids

We were raised to think this way, but this is not God's way to "live with" our wives. I Timothy 3:4-5 says that elders (who are husbands) must manage their households well. It doesn't say they have to manage their businesses well to qualify. What does it mean - to manage the home well for a man?

- It means that they know what is happening in the home and insure that needs (emotional, spiritual, physical) are being met. Isaac and Jacob in the Old Testament both had problems because they did not manage the situations in their homes well.
- They cultivate relationships with the persons in their homes.
- They plan for the growth of all the individuals in the family (wife, kids, etc.).
- They are involved in what happens at home - they don't just come home to be served, then go out to tend to their hobbies or interests.

HOME IS NOT JUST A PIT STOP, IT'S THE DESTINATION.

The management and development of the home is the husband's top priority because this is what he is judged on - not on how well he manages the business. A wife is happiest and feels wonderful when her husband lives with her in the home - managing their growth to God's glory.

The second idea Peter develops in connection with happy wives is:

2. Know your wife

...in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman
- 1 Peter 3:7b

Peter says that the husband should treat her in an understanding way. The original version says, "live with her according to knowledge." Women are usually more complex and sensitive than men - we like this about them, it contributes to their tenderness and mystery - however, it requires effort to understand.

Very important: The success you have in making your wife happy is in direct proportion to your knowledge of her.

The best compliment your wife can give you is not how big and strong you are... it is that you know her so well. It is important for your wife to know that you are truly interested in knowing her, and not just interested in getting something from her. You can usually tell when a woman is unhappy - she is the one sharing her cares and concerns with everyone else except her husband. The things you do to make her happy are really the things you have to do in order to know her:

- A willingness to share and listen to her dreams, problems, etc.
- An ability to be transparent and open with her.
- A readiness to forgive.
- Sensitivity and the ability to anticipate her needs.

These are the activities that help you to really know her and consequently they are the same activities that truly make her happy. Working on these types of things will increase your appreciation of her and her desire for you.

3. Honor your wife

...and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.
- 1 Peter 3:7c

The Greek word translated "honor" was "precious." You grant or assign her a precious role in your life, and you demonstrate this with your actions. Peter also provides the reasons to do this:

She is as precious as you are in Christ. She has a different nature, a different role but is equal in innate value. Not to do so would make you a hypocrite before God and thus your prayers would be hindered.

We should wonder how many of our prayers are not heard because of the way we treat our wives. This passage speaks to believers and assumes that they do pray to God and so dishonoring their wives would spoil their prayer life.

We dishonor our wives when we have too low or too high an opinion of them. Some treat their wives without respect or consideration. Others put her on a pedestal or are improperly submitted to their wife's leadership. We need to understand how to properly honor our wives:

- Recognize and respect her weaker physical frame by not using your strength to intimidate her but rather to serve and protect her.
- Tell her how much you appreciate what she does. Compliment and encourage her in her work, appearance as well as her ideas. Just paying the rent doesn't communicate your respect.
- Treat her with respect in front of others. Don't reveal her faults, don't ridicule, don't bring her down and don't make her feel uncomfortable in public as a way of teasing her.

- Only say and do those things that build her up in front of others. Nothing is more unpleasant than a man who lifts himself up in public at the expense of his wife.
- Show her that you consider her precious by doing some of the "dirty work" without being asked (you watch the kids while she visits with friends after worship services).

Here's a humorous look at what some husband's idea of cooking is:

MEN'S IDEA OF COOKING

Here's a definition of Outdoor Barbecuing. It's the only type of cooking a "real" man will do. When a man volunteers to do such cooking, the following chain of events is put into motion.

1. The woman goes to the store.
2. The woman "fixes" the salad, vegetables, and dessert.
3. The woman prepares the meat for cooking, places it on a tray along with the necessary cooking utensils, as he calls through a closed door... "are the steaks ready yet??" she takes it to the man, who is lounging beside the grill.
4. The man places the meat on the grill.
5. The woman goes inside to set the table and check the vegetables.
6. The woman comes out to tell the man that the meat is burning.
7. The man takes the meat off the grill and hands it to the woman.
8. The woman prepares the plates and brings them to the table.
9. After eating, the woman clears the table and does the dishes.
10. The man asks the woman how she enjoyed "her night off." And upon seeing her annoyed reaction, concludes that there is just no pleasing some women.

Demonstrate to her that she is precious by offering her small gifts, surprise outings, notes, cards, and lovers' weekends that you have arranged for the two of you. A woman who is confident that her husband honors her above others and is continually reminded of this by his loving attitude will more easily and happily submit to him in Christ.



Marriages may be made in heaven, but man is responsible for the maintenance work.

- W. Painter

SUMMARY II

The secret to maintaining a happy marriage is found in the notion that when you make your wife feel wonderful to be your wife, you empower her to make your life a happy experience as a husband. God has put into your hands the responsibility of making her feel wonderful if you will:

1. Be involved with your home - don't just visit.
2. Make the effort to know your wife better than anyone else does. If anyone knows her better than you do, there is a problem and you risk losing her. You're the expert.
3. In everything you say and do, let her see that you consider her the most precious person in your life - truly a gift from God.

If you begin doing these things, you will make her feel wonderful and she will make you a happy husband, and your marriage will be greater and greater as time goes on.

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