

February 3, 1974
Ephesians 5:22-33
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CAN WE SAVE OUR MARRIAGES?

It is difficult to find in the New Testament any passages of scripture which have a direct and specific reference to marriage. Jesus was not married nor was Paul. The latter, as evidenced in much that he wrote, expressed primarily the customs and mores of his time, rather than general principles on the subject of matrimonial harmony. Paul put the husband in the pre-eminent position. That was the way things were in his day. There was no reason for Paul, a bachelor, to seek to change things. He is a bit like the newlyweds who went to the beach and of course the wife could not decide what to wear. "Here, honey," said the husband, "wear my pants." "But darling," she replied, "they are much too big for me." "And don't you ever forget it," responded the husband.

Specifically, the New Testament says very little about marriage. However, every moral and ethical precept laid down there has an important application to matrimony. As a consequence many marriage counselors believe that religion is by far the most important ingredient in a happy marriage, as indeed it is in any human relationship. We shall speak further of this in a few minutes.

I have already indicated in my annual report to the congregation my intense concern for marriage and the family. I believe the future of America as a nation, as well as the future of our individual children, is heavily dependent upon what happens between husbands and wives and on what happens in our homes and families.

My concern is generated by my experience as a counselor and by statistics. I have seen what happens in broken marriages and broken homes and I assure you that no effort to preserve those marriages and homes is too great. The statistics show an alarming increase in divorce. In the last decade divorce increased by 85%. For every three new marriages today one old marriage ends in divorce or annulment.* And the rate continues to climb. One consequence is that last year there were nearly 9 million children under 18 years of age growing up in fatherless homes. No wonder Colley Cibber wrote: "O, how many torments lie in the small circle of the wedding ring."

II

If one had to put his finger on the general and primary cause of marital failure there is no doubt that the answer would be immaturity. The young entering marriage are indeed blinded by love. Even with added years and experience many, many people fail to mature. Let me list some attitudes which can be deadly to any marriage and of which the immature are so often guilty:

* U.S. News & World Report, August 14, 1972, page 30

1. Many people go into marriage seeking primarily their own happiness. The great majority of philosophers since long before Socrates have assured us that that is not the pathway to success. If that is one's primary concern happiness will forever be elusive. Happiness can only be the by-product of a dedicated effort to make the other party happy. Many marriages break up today because the partners involved feel a vague kind of unhappiness which they blame on the marriage.

2. Too many people got married with the idea that they were going to change their mate. The person you are engaged to is the same person, so far as habits and idiosyncrasies are concerned, as the person you will hopefully be married to 10 years or 20 years from now. It is extremely difficult for people to change. They need a strong motivation which is usually absent by the time divorce threatens.

One young man told his fiancée that after they were married he wanted to continue to play poker on Thursday nights with his friends. She insisted that that would be fine. Secretly she believed that after the marriage he would want to stay home with her and would stop playing poker. After the marriage however he continued to play and nothing she could do would dissuade him. Finally he said to her, "I told you before we were married that I wanted to play poker every Thursday night and you said it would be all right." "Yes," she replied, "but I thought you would change after we were married." Unfortunately it seldom works that way.

3. Many couples naively expect far too much out of marriage. They have been misled by romantic novels, movies, and TV productions. For this reason marriage is not for children or for the immature. Marriage is a means of grace, an opportunity for growth and development. With all growth and development there is some struggle and pain. Those who want a successful marriage must be willing to make this effort and pay this price.

Rebecca Liswood, in her book First Aid For the Happy Marriage, says there are six people involved in every marriage. In the case of both husband and wife there is

the person you are
the person you would like to be
the person your mate would like you to be.

Few of us are satisfied with what we are, and find it difficult to change. It is not any easier for our husbands or our wives. There is no such thing as a perfect mate: God help the person who finds one!

4. Too many people get married without paying any attention to their marriage vows, especially that vow which declares, "For better or for worse."

To be sure, there are a few marriages that just will not work. There are serious basic problems that are unlikely to be resolved. But these are a small minority. In many cases of divorce the problem is that the husband or wife, or both, never really made any real commitment at the outset of the marriage. Unconsciously they were saying, "I hope it works, but if it doesn't we can end it without too much difficulty."

A happy marriage is something worth struggling for. We should resolve that we will not fail, that we are bigger and stronger than any problem we may have. A good marriage requires a deep commitment to one another. For better or for worse. Few people complain when it is better. Last year 800,000 couples complained to the point of divorce because it was worse.

5. Because there are difficulties and problems in marriage--all marriage--does not mean that you and your mate are incompatible. Incompatibility is today a catch word which far too many are using as a rationale for the easy way out. Incompatible means "incapable of harmonious combination." A divorce or threat of divorce usually does not mean this. What it usually means is that the two parties are having difficulties and are tired of trying, or don't know how, to resolve them, so they are ready to give up. They are not really incompatible, they have just lost their motivation.

III

Now all of this leads us to a very important consideration, that of getting help for sick marriages. If a couple is in trouble in their marriage it is not a sign of strength to stay away from a marriage counselor. Rather it is a sign of weakness and of false pride. When our bodies are sick we go to a physician. When our cars are sick we take them to a garage. When our marriage is sick we must likewise seek help and before it is too late. Every counselor feels this sense of frustration--"If only this person or this couple had come sooner I might have helped them. Now it looks as if it was too late. The barriers built by bitterness and pride are too high." If you need help, get help. Your marriage is worth every bit of effort you can expend to make it succeed.

Because this is a church, and we are Christians, and I am a minister, let me speak a bit more about religion, which I sincerely and honestly believe to be by far the most important ingredient in any marriage and in any family.

The Oklahoma City Family Clinic has made a startling discovery. A few years ago they reported the following:

"The family council has found that reconciliation becomes almost a certainty if we can persuade the couple to become active in church." *

* DeWitt Reddick, "Child Family Digest", Feb., 1954.

Let me also quote a prominent marriage counselor, Dr. James A. Peterson, who, in his book, Toward A Successful Marriage, says:

"Man... dwells somewhere between the level of the animal and the angel. It matters in marriage whether the couple reach upward in their common interests toward that which is creative and lofty or whether they are content with that which is tawdry and inconsequential."

I have already pointed out what every married person here knows-- that marriage means some struggle and difficulty. The synonym for marriage is "adjustment". It could never be otherwise. Two people with different heredities and environments, different customs and traditions, try to bring all of their individual psychological and emotional baggage into a marriage. Marriage is thus a sharing and we ought to ask not, "What do I get out of it?", but "What am I putting into it?"

In this situation nothing can be more important than the religious virtues: patience, understanding, forgiveness, respect, and two virtues not mentioned directly in the Bible; a sense of humor, and the ability and willingness to communicate.

Without a daily practice of these virtues and without the reinforcement of a church relationship, it becomes increasingly difficult for "the two to become one". Every marriage should be a contract between three persons; a man, a woman and God.

Because a happy and successful marriage is a bit of a struggle there are some who want to eliminate the institution entirely. Perhaps they are the same persons who want to eliminate everything in society that is hard and difficult, but without which man cannot grow and develop as God intended. As Edmund Burke once pointed out, there is no substitute for a good marriage:

"The Christian religion by confining marriage to pairs and rendering the relation indissoluble, has by these two things done more toward the peace, happiness, settlement and civilization of the world than by any other part in this whole scheme of divine wisdom."

Finally, hear this statement by two California marriage counselors, Joseph and Lois Bird:

"Given sufficient motivation and at least normal intelligence, most couples can attain a successful, mutually fulfilling marriage. Marriage is not a matter of 'matching' or 'luck' or falling in love. It is the product of firm values, clear, productive goals and rational thinking leading to mature emotion and responsible behaviour." *

Can we save our marriages? Of course we can--if we want to badly enough. The result will be joy, and peace and a blessedness which nothing else can give.

* Marriage is For Grownups, Jos. and Lois Bird, Doubleday, 1969