

June 3, 2007
Building Strong Marriages
Luke 6:32-33

Every parent wants what's best for his children. We want our kids to have the best education possible, the best healthcare possible, the best job possible and naturally we pray that our sons and daughters will also have the best marriages possible. Marriage is such an incredibly important relationship. If our children are happily married, the opportunities for them to have a successful life increase dramatically.

A happy and strong marriage is the foundation for a life of fulfillment. Over the years I have spoken with many couples who attribute their personal happiness to a strong marriage. The old adage that behind every successful man is a loving wife is true, but it is also true that behind every successful woman is a loving husband.

I believe the Bible teaches that God wants his children to have healthy and happy marriages. It was God who joined the first couple together in the Garden of Eden. The two were to become one flesh, a beautiful term signifying that Adam and Eve were to be united not only physically but spiritually and emotionally as well. Did you know that one of the most frequent pictures in the Bible of God's relationship with his people is the marriage relationship? God is depicted as a loving and caring husband. The church is understood as the Bride of Christ. Family terms such as Bride and Groom are used throughout scripture as ways that God relates to his people.

Marriage is important to God for many reasons, but one important reason is because marriage reflects the relationship that God has with his people. In other words, a Christian marriage is supposed to be a witness of God's presence in the world. When two Christian people have a solid and strong marriage, it provides a wonderful example of God's faithful love.

A few years ago a couple I had known for over twenty years passed away. Nick and Gay had been married for over forty years and led the single ministry in a church I served in Texas. They both looked like movie stars. When they walked into a room every head turned to see this beautiful couple. But it wasn't just their physical appearance; it was the way they looked at each other, the way they touched each other and laughed with each other that made them such beautiful people. They were so much in love. What a fantastic witness they were of God's presence in the world. These two people lived as testimonies to the grace and love of God. They served as models of marriage for other single adults. A strong and healthy marriage is one of the best ways we can tell others about our walk with God.

I am deeply saddened that so many Christian marriages end in divorce. And I am also troubled that so many other Christian marriages are just tolerated living arrangements that do not reflect God's presence. A Christian marriage should be in the words of Peter Marshall, "The highest hall of human happiness." Too often it is not. Why do marriages fail? Why do so many couples live in miserable marriage relationships?

I think some people just have **unrealistic expectations of marriage**. Once there was a young woman in my office who spoke of her upcoming marriage. She told me that her life had been a mess and she was looking forward to marriage so that her husband could help her straighten out her life. Wow! She expected that her husband would solve the problems that she was unable to solve herself. That marriage had failure written all over it.

Sometimes people look for a mate who can make them happy. But if you are an unhappy person, you can't expect someone else to create happiness for you. Yes, a mate may **add** joy and happiness to a person's life, but another person should never be held responsible for someone else's happiness. Marriage must never be viewed as a way to solve problems. People marry in order to share life, to dream together, to play together and to create a home together. People who believe that marriage will make them happier are going to be disappointed. If you are unhappy before marriage, you will be unhappy after marriage.

Another reason why marriages fail is because of the **myth of greener grass**. People who are unhappy in marriage think, "If only I were married to someone else, then I think I would have a happy marriage." But thinking that a different partner would bring a different result to your marriage relationship is wishful thinking.

Stanley Hauerwas, a Christian ethics professor at Duke University, has coined a phrase called "The Hauerwas maxim." The first part of the maxim goes like this: "You can count on the fact that you will always marry the wrong person." The second part of the Hauerwas maxim adds, "You can count on the fact that you will always marry the right person." What Hauerwas is saying is that marriage is what you make of it. You will be the one who decides whether that marriage succeeds or fails. It's not so important that you marry just the right person; it's far more important that you **be the right person!**

The story is told of a young intern who was studying to be a psychiatrist. As an intern he was sent to a hospital to work with patients who were in various stages of psychological stress. One of the doctors of the hospital accompanied the intern on a tour of the facilities. During this tour the intern came to a room where a young man inside the room was beating his head against the wall and

screaming and crying uncontrollably. The intern asked the doctor, "And what is the situation here?" The doctor responded, "Well, that young man was engaged to be married to Linda and she dumped him at the last minute." "I see," said the young intern.

They moved further down the hospital corridor where the intern glanced inside another heavily padded cell. Once again he could see a young man inside banging his head against the wall and screaming. The intern looked at the doctor and said, "What is wrong with this patient?" The doctor said, "That's the man who married Linda."

The grass is very seldom greener on the other side of the fence. Marriage will become what you make of it. Instead of looking for the right person, decide right now to be the right person and you will be well on your way to a successful marriage.

Another reason why some marriage relationships fail is because couples misunderstand the **role of conflict in marriage**. Some people think that conflict is a sign of a failing relationship. If two people argue or disagree the thought is that they must not be right for each other. After all, if they were truly right, then they would agree on everything, right? Wrong! Successful marriages are not relationships where there is no conflict but rather marriages that succeed are where two people learn how to deal with conflict.

I really don't like conflict, but the fact of the matter is growth occurs through conflict. A friendship or relationship cannot mature until it faces severe conflict. When people tell me they never argue, that is a sure sign that something is seriously wrong in the relationship. I met a couple a number of years ago who had been married twelve years. The wife told me that in all their years together they had never had a disagreement. I said to her, "I guess someone gave up on the marriage pretty quickly." In authentic relationships you will have conflict.

The two verses we read a moment ago can be of great benefit to a struggling marriage. Jesus makes two statements regarding human love and divine love. Human love is conditional on how a person treats you or speaks to you or what that person does for you. Human love is driven by feelings and emotions.

There is nothing wrong with human love. It is God's gift to us. But human love is incomplete. If the only love you have for your partner is human love, then you are vulnerable to the ebb and flow of human emotions. And sometimes this love is simply not strong enough to endure the tough times of marriage.

Years ago there was a popular song that expressed the thinness of human love:

"I don't love you anymore, To waste our lives would be a sin, Please release me, let me go. Release me and let me love again."

Human love by itself is oftentimes not strong enough to keep two people together. If the only glue that holds our marriages together is human love, then our love for one another will be as unpredictable as the weather.

But there is another kind of love that can add stability to a marriage. It does not take the place of human love; it only supplements human love, strengthens and reinforces it. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." There is no way that human love can love an enemy or do good to those who hate us. Jesus' idea of love has divine origins. God's love through us can do good even to our enemies. Divine love is not a feeling or an emotion. Divine love is an act of the will. In a Christian marriage between two people who have committed their lives to Christ, human love and divine love are linked together. In this understanding of love there is present all the passion and emotion of human beings, but joined with human love is divine love. Divine love is present even when human love struggles.

Let me see if I can explain. A couple visits the pastor convinced that their marriage is unsalvageable. They don't have feelings for each other, all the emotion and passion has faded from their marriage. They explain to the pastor that they do not love each other.

The pastor listens to the couple and when they are finished he says to them, "I understand that you do not love each other any more. But can you as Christians at least love each other the way Christ taught us to love our enemies? Can you at least love each other as enemies? Can you begin there?"

The pastor then explained that Christ teaches his disciples to do good to their enemies, to pray for them, to bless them and to seek the very best for them. "You may not love each other as husband and wife, but can you at least love each other as enemies," the pastor said. Finally, the couple agreed to try and love each other as enemies.

For the next several months the husband and wife treated each other with the kindness with which they would treat an enemy. They prayed for each other day by day. They spoke words of blessing to each other throughout the day. They sought the very best for one another. One day as they spoke a word of blessing to each other, they suddenly embraced and cried in each other's arms. Because they had treated each other as Christ taught us to treat our enemies, they had fallen in love all over again. Wow! Divine love can put back the most frazzled relationship together again.

Christian marriages need to practice divine love. Marriage is not about marrying the right person. A happy and strong Christian marriage is about being the right person. If your marriage is struggling don't blame your mate; rather look into the mirror and decide

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right now to change the way you love your spouse. When you love with divine love your marriage will grow to be strong and healthy, and it will be a witness of God's presence in the world. Amen.