

Four Steps to a God-Pleasing Marriage

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5/6/07

Introduction.

- A. As anybody who hasn't lived in a cave for 50 years knows, American marriage is an institution in crisis. We've all seen the gloomy statistics about how many marriages end in divorce, how many couples stay married but unhappy, and so forth. It is likely, in fact, that these problems are something we have personally seen rather than just read about. The house we bought was on the market because the couple who owned it divorced.
- B. Sadly, those within the church are not any more immune to this problem than those outside of it are. Because preachers aren't entirely clueless, the past few years have produced a glut of sermons on having happy marriages, successful marriages, strong marriages, and so on. Because I haven't preached one recently, I decided that I needed to, but as I considered the subject, I realized that I was trying to solve the insoluble.
- C. The thing is, folks, that there is nothing any one of us can do to make sure that our marriages are happy, successful, or strong. It's just not possible; the happiness of any given marriage is determined by two people, not just one. I'm thankful that I have a wife who is committed to the success of our marriage, but if I am resolved to be a jerk and make her life miserable no matter what, there is nothing she can do about it.
- D. The problem with this is that if having a happy marriage is our focus, it becomes too easy to blame our spouses for our problems instead of considering what we can do about them ourselves. We have no difficulty listing their shortcomings in great detail, but it's much harder to work on our own, so we naturally focus on them, not us. This leads us to become embittered without doing anything to solve the problem.
- E. In our marriages, then, we need to focus not on the unattainable goal of happiness in marriage, but on the eminently attainable goal of pleasing God in our marriages. Here's the difference: our spouses can keep our marriages from being happy, but there is nothing they can do to keep us from doing what makes God happy. That depends not on them, but on us. Now, it's not that this has nothing to do with our happiness. I am convinced that a husband and wife who obey the Lord will have a happy marriage. That's just the way things work. However, this needs to be a side benefit to our actions, not the motivation behind them. Instead, let's turn to the Scripture to learn about four steps to a God-pleasing marriage.

I. Be Selfless and Pure.

- A. The first thing we need to do to accomplish this crucial spiritual goal is to **BE SELFLESS**. This is not a culturally popular virtue. In America, we are an individualistic people, and we believe that in everything, we need to look out for Number One first. Consider, for example, the trend toward pre-nuptial agreements. I read an article just a couple weeks ago that advocated that anyone entering into a marriage, especially if he has sizable wealth, needs to protect himself with a pre-nup. That way, when the marriage craters, he can just take all of his toys and go home. Now, there are at least three conspicuous problems with this. First of all, it shows that the guy with his pre-nup values his money above everything else. Second, it shows that he assumes that his new bride (or groom) is going to grab at his money as soon as possible. Finally, it shows that he expects the marriage to end in divorce. Ironically enough, he will need the pre-nup, because when he enters marriage with those attitudes, divorce is exactly what is going to happen. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- B. By contrast, look at the way Paul describes what our attitudes should be in everything. We see his thoughts on the matter in Philippians 2:3-5. We should put not ourselves first, but our spouses first. We should seek not to protect ourselves, but to protect them. When we say the words of the marriage vow before man and God, what God hears from us is a promise to devote ourselves to our new spouses as long as life endures, and with the one exception of adultery, He will hold us to that promise no matter what.
- C. Now we might ask, "What if my husband is a jerk? What if he consistently takes advantage of me and mistreats me? Do I get to protect myself then?" The Biblical answer is no. Our duty to be selfless exists independently of whatever anyone else does. This doesn't mean that we have to be the lifeless targets of abuse or other illegal behavior, but it does mean we must do good to our spouses regardless.
- D. In times like that, we might wonder who will look out for us if we won't do it ourselves, but that kind of support is what we need to look to God for. Consider Peter's words on the subject in 1 Peter 4:19. We're not throwing our lives away when we are selfless. We're not being fools. Instead, we're trusting God.
- E. In addition to being selfless, we also need to **BE PURE**. This does not simply mean that we should abstain from adultery, although that is certainly true. Instead, it means that in our marriages we need to seek purity of heart. Let's see what our Lord has to say about this in Matthew 5:8. Only if we attain to this godly purity of heart can we hope to dwell with God forever in heaven. If we don't have it, we won't be there.
- F. Jesus addresses one of the main challenges in marriage to purity of heart just a few verses down, in Matthew 5:27-28. Unlike adultery, this is one of those sneaky sins. It may well be that we can lust, and no one will ever know but God. However, God does know, and He views it with the same hatred as adultery itself.

- G. We need to dedicate ourselves, then, to maintaining our purity of heart, and the first step in this process is understanding what we are doing when we lust. For the male pornography addict who logs onto the Internet, what he's looking for is not the fantasy of a perfect body. He's looking for the fantasy of the perfect woman, the woman who is passionately into him all the time and who never, ever has a headache. As I understand things, the lust of the woman is more complex. It involves sex, yes, but it also involves bubble baths drawn every day when she comes home from work, and flowers twice a week, and a hundred other things besides. It is the fantasy of the perfect man, who constantly dedicates his life to loving her and caring for her.
- H. As these fantasies preoccupy us, they collide with reality in any number of disastrous ways. First of all, as we develop them, we inevitably end up comparing our flesh-and-blood spouses to them, and guess who loses that comparison? We actually become embittered against our husbands and wives because they fall short of perfection. As this process continues, we come to believe in the reality of our fantasy so much that we leave ourselves open to pursuing it. We may not even be consciously aware of it, but as attractive people pass through our lives, we begin to wonder if they would be the perfect spouses, if only we were married to them. We become vulnerable to temptation, and guess what Satan is only too happy to provide? An innocent friendship becomes anything but innocent, and adultery in the heart becomes adultery in the flesh.
- I. If we struggle with this, we need to see that our lustful daydreams are not real. There is no such thing as the perfect woman or the perfect man, and if we believe in them, all we're doing is setting the hook for the devil. Consider Solomon's take on adultery in Proverbs 5:3-4. Adultery is a complete lie. In reality, it is bad for us physically, bad for us emotionally, and most of all, bad for us spiritually. Let's keep our hearts pure instead.

II. Steadfastness and Love.

- A. After this, we need to recognize that in addition to being pure, we must **BE STEADFAST**. Marriage is a marathon, not a sprint, and if we don't grasp that, we're likely to drop out of the race before we finish the course. The God-pleasing actions that we've talked about, and many more besides, can't just be hobbies. We have to take them into ourselves and make them part of the way we live. This is much easier when we meet with some reward for our actions, when our spouses show their appreciation of the changes we're trying to enact. We need to remember, though, that it's not their favor that we're courting. It's the favor of God, and we need to keep doing what is right even if we don't see a physical return on our investment. Look at Peter's take on this in 1 Peter 2:19-20. Peter here speaks in the context of servants and masters, but the principle is just as applicable to marriage. God cares that we continue to do right, even if no one else seems to.
- B. The point is, friends, that we need to learn to see our lives in terms of spiritual actions and spiritual rewards, rather than doing what seems best from an earthly perspective. It's not by random chance that these pitfalls and stumbling blocks arise in our marriages. It's Satan using a sad situation to tempt us to stray from God. The devil is delighted to work with suffering too. Once again, let's examine Peter's thoughts on the subject in 1 Peter 5:8-10. We quote the beginning verse of this passage a lot, and it is generally true, but we need to see as well that the specific context here is about Satan tempting us to fall away because of suffering, to do wrong instead of right because it seems easier. The point is, though, that no matter how difficult our situation is, how much garbage we have to put up with, it's only going to bedevil us for a limited time. Because of our faithfulness here for a little while, God will give us an eternal reward, and none of us will regret our choice.
- C. Finally, though, we must learn to **BE LOVING**. This isn't the bubble-gum love of Top 40 radio; this is a commitment that involves all of our being. Let's consider the way Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5. This is a very familiar text. Even people who rarely study the Bible know that 1 Corinthians 13 is the chapter of love. In fact, if I remember rightly, when Lauren and I got married, when they took pictures of our hands with our rings on, they used 1 Corinthians 13 as the backdrop. However, this Scripture is anything but mooshy-gooshy, warm fuzziness without any teeth to it. If we want to please God and put these precepts into practice, we will have to challenge ourselves for the rest of our lives. Let's recast the text in terms of our spouses and ourselves to see what love means in our marriages. If you look at the third page of your packet this morning, it contains just such a recasting. It means we can say at the end of each day:
 1. **I have been patient with my spouse.**
 2. **I have been kind with my spouse.**
 3. **I have not been jealous with my spouse.**
 4. **I have not bragged before my spouse.**
 5. **I have not been arrogant toward my spouse.**
 6. **I have not been rude toward my spouse.**
 7. **I have not sought my own from my spouse.**
 8. **I have not been provoked by my spouse.**
 9. **I have not recorded the wrongs of my spouse.**
- D. This daily pattern of relentless service and self-sacrifice is the way that God wants our marriages to be. It might not make them happy; it might not make them strong, but it will please Him, and that's what matters.

Conclusion. Our ambition to please God, though, must be predicated on having a right relationship with Him.