



Marriage

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Marriage brings together what is often separated – sex, love, friendship, faithfulness – and makes of them something greater than the sum of their parts. It allows people to find love that lasts, the knowledge that we matter unconditionally to someone else, and something that endures.

My wife, Brenda, and I were married July 24th, 1982. Both of us are committed to one another. Since we are going to live together till death parts us, we thought we should make our union as joyful and wonderful as possible. What a blessing it is to know that my spouse will always be there, that when things are tough neither of us will walk away, that whatever we face we will not face alone. The Hebrew and Greek words for that kind of commitment respectively are *emunah* and *pistos*, typically translated as “faithfulness.” That is what marriage is: a pledge to someone else, a loyalty that is love and a love that is loyal. Both Hosea and Isaiah saw this dynamic as the closest metaphor of God’s love for us and ours for God.

Those who are married should be thankful for the gift of love that matures every year, weaving two lives together and allowing them to enjoy a dynamic that can only be savored by them. Marriage in its proper perspective is a cornerstone in the midst of the world’s civilizations, the union of a man and woman via a lifetime covenant of love, the proper setting for sexual intimacy, and God’s venue for procreation and the nurture of children. The Judeo-Christian viewpoint on matrimony believes that “he who finds a wife finds what is good” (Pro. 18:22). That is also true for the woman who finds a husband! But what do you do with a spouse when you have one?

When Brenda and I were engaged, our goal was not just getting to the altar but the start of a journey of love. Our marriage goal today is more than to survive as a couple, to not get divorced, or to have a place for safe sex. In accordance with John 10:10, we realize that the thief will come, tempting us to destroy our union or causing us to settle for a mediocre marriage; however, our Lord Jesus has come that we might have a great marriage. Therefore, as we plan for so many things in life (e.g., vacations, career changes, children, and the purchase of a house), we have set our hearts on the goal of an extraordinary marriage and plan to that end. Understanding and applying the following marriage principles have helped us towards this goal.¹

¹ Many excellent books examine this topic more extensively; e.g., *The Marriage Builder* by Larry Crabb; *Boundaries in Marriage* by Henry Cloud & John Townsend; and *Love for a Lifetime* by James C. Dobson; *Love and Respect* by Emerson Eggerichs.

Basic Marriage Principles:

1. Each spouse must realize that unless his/her Christianity works at home, it is worth very little elsewhere. As a result, each partner should endeavor not to have a good marriage, but an extraordinary one!
2. God puts a man and woman together and calls them for his purposes and glory; however, many marriages come to a crisis point where one or both spouses consistently question why they married their spouse. Though divorce is not the unpardonable sin, only in rare exceptions may this question properly fester into thoughts of divorce; e.g., in the case of abusive, unfaithful spouses.
3. Though most marriages address the personal needs of each spouse, they are also God-ordained vehicles for blessing and change in the lives of the marriage partners. A good marriage is not always designed to make someone happy, but it can make a person holy. Instead of taking part in this sanctification process, couples often live separate lives under one roof. They become united in name but divided in heart.
4. Each spouse should submit foremost to the Lord and then to one to another. Admittedly, there are many different personality types in a marriage, whether melancholy, sanguine or choleric, as well as different individual maturity levels. For the husband, this dynamic involves taking on the servant-leadership role of Christ, washing his beloved's feet, if necessary, in order for the marriage to fulfill its God-given call. Correspondingly, the wife joins him in this task of insuring that their marriage is healthy and fruitful. Just as the Trinity reflects equal worth with differing values, God created a man and a woman with equal worth but differing roles and responsibilities in marriage. This dynamic involves death to a person's selfish ways and a resurrection to the new life available to the Christian. Understanding Jesus' example to his disciples is essential to live this type of life. Though he deserved all honor and worship, he humbled himself and served others, even those who betrayed him. The Christian is exhorted to do likewise.
5. A person's spouse should be his/her best friend, and their marriage should be more important than their careers, sports teams, hobbies, or other friends. Having a successful marriage is more significant than any other endeavor, including earning a high salary, obtaining degrees, or even having leadership positions at church.

6. Rare is the couple that enters marriage with a mature love for each other. In many ways, nascent love for a future spouse is blind; however, after several years of living together, each spouse is much more aware of exactly who they married. Resultantly, their love for one another must also grow in order for their marriage to stay healthy. When the newness of the relationship has worn off, marital friction is possible. Perhaps this is why Ben Franklin encouraged his generation to enter into marriage with both eyes wide open and then to close one after the wedding ceremony. In fact, a deeper awareness of a spouse's uniqueness, deficiencies, or transformations that have occurred over the years can help a husband or wife grow in their love towards their forever friend.
7. The quality of a person's marriage will affect those it comes in contact with and the children it may engender. A child's view of God, people, relationships, families, and himself are initially formed by his family experience. Similarly, a person's neighbors, co-workers, extended family, and even strangers are affected by their exposure to your marriage.
8. Being around either in-laws or immediate family members is great, and the heritage of close extended family relationships is invaluable. However, although married couples should always deeply love and honor their parents, they are called to leave dad and mom and become united as one separate entity, establishing their own traditions and identity.
9. The decision of marriage should not be rushed into haphazardly or blindly nor should it be lived in that state. During the preparation stage for marriage and typically the first five years of it, a couple will plant new seminal patterns that can take as many as twenty years to bear either good or bad fruit. The tricky part about this dynamic is that it is not until the reaping years that a couple realizes how effective or ineffective they were during their sowing years. Typically, during the initial years of marriage a young couple encounters many new things: the buying of a house, the start of a career, the purchase of a car and the arrival of children. Of all the new things a couple will encounter, they should collectively work on their marriage most of all. Such labors will pay sweet dividends.

10. No marriage is an instant success or beyond repair. Its fate, however, is the result of decisions made and lifestyles lived over the course of days, months, and years. All marriages go through seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter. In fact, though no couple desires to go through a winter season, each season helps the marriage grow and mature. In the midst of a winter season, each couple is faced with the challenge of making the right choices that will allow for spring time to arrive.

Mine and my wife's overarching goal in marriage, which we hope is also yours, is to continue on a marital journey of having an extraordinary marriage that allows others to see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven. Towards this end, I have listed below our spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical marriage goals. None of them should be pursued legalistically as each couple will have their own unique aspirations. Since marriage is a mystery that reflects Christ and his Church, all its parameters cannot be intricately explained or equally applied to each marriage. Nonetheless, we hope that our marital objectives inspire you to create your own.

Spiritual:

1. As followers of Jesus, we desire to continue to grow in both our personal relationship with God and our witness to the world around us.
2. We desire that our spouse and best friend not settle for less than God has called them to be and will work, pray and hope for that not to happen. What skills does my spouse need to reach God's best for her? What encouragement can I supply that she may continue in her calling?
3. We will pray regularly for the other's success, joy, and well-being.
4. Each day, we will find time to pray together, whether over a meal or before going to sleep; however, every week we will also spend an extended time together in prayer. Spouses have a unique ability to pray as one person, one heart. Further, prayers that bear a person's soul will unite like few other activities.
5. We will endeavor to be involved in some type of ministry together, whether we are on the giving or receiving end of this ministry.
6. From time-to-time, we will either read an appropriate marriage book or get away to a marriage retreat.

Emotional.

1. We desire to be sympathetic and compassionate towards one another, letting the intimate moments of our love, physical attraction, and empathy spill appropriately into our everyday lives. Instead of expecting my needs to be met foremost, I will look for ways to meet the needs of my significant other.
2. When we disagree – and we will – we must not argue out of anger, a desire to hurt the other, an attempt to get in the last word, or just a need to air an opinion. Further, name-calling and finger-pointing have no place in our home. All of these dynamics are expressions of King Self, rather than King Jesus. Since good conversational skills are essential for any healthy relationship, we will endeavor to hone this talent as well as venture to learn our spouse's communication style and love language.
3. We hope to respond, rather than react, to a wrong done to us. Offenses will come – some intentional, a number of them not. We decide ahead of time to forgive and will leave it to God to convict and correct. This is not to say that we will not speak up for ourselves or share how we have been hurt, but only after we are free from resentment or any desire for revenge.
4. We will not allow any walls to be built between us, nor will we develop other intimate relationships with the opposite sex. Walls are built via very small “bricks” that are repeatedly put in place. Similarly, quick retorts, neglected promises, or festering hurts that are sown repetitively will eventually build walls of silence and resentment. Instead, we desire that “the sun would not go down while we are still angry,” and that our intimate relational and physical needs will be met in none other than our spouse.

Mental:

1. We desire to know what is significant to our special friend and aspire to see it happen for them, asking God for helpful, creative ways to support our spouse.
2. We will make earnest and valid attempts to understand the interests of our spouse. No two people are alike in all their interests, but if we want to have an excellent marriage, we will know what excites our spouse. Shopping or sports may not motivate me; nevertheless, if it is of interest to my best friend, I need be sympathetic to what they enjoy and know enough about it to discuss it to some degree with them.
3. As a couple, we will prayerfully and seasonally work through our budget, personal vision statements, philosophy of life, marriage patterns, and child raising goals, revising them as needed. Our goal is neither to keep up with the Joneses nor to be necessarily rich in external possessions; instead, we desire passionately to be in a vibrant, healthy relationship with our Lord and our spouse.
4. Should we be given the privilege of raising children to be “salt” and “light” in this world, though this labor of love will be the first ministry of our marriage, we will not let our kids either divide us or cause us to improperly prioritize our lives. These children will naturally one day depart from our home, leaving us as we were before they came – joyfully and fruitfully united for God’s purposes.
5. We realize that our marriage will present us with opportunities for our love to either deepen or grow cold. As a result, we desire to overlook offenses and be vigilant in our pursuit of a deep, abiding friendship with our spouse.
6. We recognize that over time we will mirror each other in many ways, but in other ways our spouse will never be like us. Either way, we will not attempt to create our spouse into either our image or our vision of what they should be.

Physical:

1. When necessary, we resolve to insure that our spouse has time just for themselves, whether this means - along with time for devotions - a regular workout time, an art class, or just time for a leisurely walk. Indeed, the pressures of family, work, and life require a release valve.
2. Every week we will attempt to do something unique together, even if this only involves a pleasant, extended conversation. Hopefully, such times will include opportunities to interact with one another more than sitting before a movie screen or gathering with our mutual friends. Schedules fill quickly, and several weeks can hastily and easily go by before the two of us spend quality time together; therefore, though we welcome the various opportunities that will spontaneously allow us to have time together, we will also intentionally make them happen. Resultantly, we will endeavor to eat together at least one meal a day. Our goal to be the best of friends requires effort; nevertheless, this labor of love is worth it!
3. Every month, we will have a great date. Money is not the ticket to this opportunity. This is our chance to share more deeply with our soul-mate, experience their uniqueness, and either reacquaint an old interest or strengthen our growing bond of love.
4. At least once every year, we will take an overnight time for just the two of us that does not include children, friends, or relatives. This is not too much to ask of others or ourselves. We are building a marriage that will last through all the changes and stages of life.
5. We will strive to stay in shape for each other, desiring to meet the physical needs of one another. Good health is also a gift we give to ourselves and each other; however, should our mate get sick, we will focus on their health as a primary concern.

By Peter Dubbelman ©