

The Mystery of Marriage • Ephesians 5:31-32

Among American adults 51 percent are currently married, 7 percent live together with a partner, 8 percent are widowed, 11 percent are divorced, 3 percent are separated and 18 percent have never married. That does not add up to 100 percent, but that is because the numbers have been rounded off and because there is a mystery to the remaining few percentage points.

There are some topics that trigger opinions, but marriage also triggers emotions. In some ways marriage is a difficult topic to talk about because it produces such a range of feelings—hope; regret; happiness; fear; resentment; disappointment; satisfaction; anger; delight.

Every one of us knows a lot about marriage; yet marriage still remains a mystery. We have observed our parents' marriages. We see the sometimes-twisted stereotypes of marriage on television. We think we know about the marriages of neighbors and friends. We know about our own marriages or we fantasize about the marriage of our dreams. We think we know so much when often we know so little. It seems so obvious and easy to make a marriage succeed and then we watch as so many people mess it up.

Marriages are like fingerprints. Every one is unique. The mystery of my marriage is different from the mystery of your marriage. Marriages can be very hard to figure out.

Even the best of people in the best of marriages often find it hard to explain what makes them succeed.

Let there be no doubt that God values marriage! That is one of the major points of the creation story at the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 2:18 and 21-24 tells us:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and

closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

In God's view, man and woman were once one. They were a unit with common roots and shared essence. They were not only made for each other, they were made from each other.

The New Testament picks up on what started in the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, but adds another line in Ephesians 5:31-32 where it says, " 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."

So marriage is a *profound mystery*. It is not just a mystery; it is a *profound* mystery! That does not mean it is a bigger mystery. It means it is better, more wonderful, more significant and more important. How amazing that when St. Paul wrote to the first century church he used the same word (mystery) to refer to the Gos-

pel of Jesus and to the marriage of a man and a woman!

If we quickly review our series on Bible mysteries we may remember that the New Testament was written in Greek. *Mysterion* was the Greek word for mystery and referred to something that was once hidden but is now revealed.

In the fourth century A.D., Roman Catholic Pope Damasus commissioned a translation of the Bible into Latin. A monk named Jerome translated the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek into Latin. His translation was called the Latin Vulgate and it was adopted as the official

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and authoritative version of the Catholic Church. When he translated the Greek word *mysterion* into Latin he used the Latin word *sacramentum*. In its old definition *sacramentum* meant pretty much the same in Latin as the Greek word *mysterion*. However, in later years the word “sacrament” took on a new and different meaning similar to baptism and communion as a means of saving grace. As a result, marriage became one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

I appreciate the high value given to marriage in the idea of sacrament but I think we need to stick closest to the biblical use of *mysterion*—that marriage is a wonderful gift from God that has a profound blessing and truth to it.

The mystery of marriage is that it has a supernatural unity. It is like the unity that parents and children have, but it goes beyond that and eventually replaces the parent-child relationship with the husband-wife relationship. Marriage has a supernatural blessing and presence. It is important to God and he glues it together in a way that is unlike any other relationship. The sexual union of marriage is only one expression of the deeper connection of soul, mind and friendship. These are two people who are meant to complete one another.

God’s plan is for a man and woman to leave parents and unite with a marriage partner. In other words, marriage is to become the primary social relationship of life replacing family of origin with a new family through marriage.

I know what you may be thinking. There are people who have gone from terrible parents to terrible marriages. That is true. But there are also people who have gone from good parents to good marriages. The mystery of God is that marriage works—not always—but it does work. And, when it works it is a marvelous, profound, wonderful, almost indescribable relationship.

In 1995 Christopher Reeve went from being Superman on the screen to being a paraplegic in a wheelchair. He was in a horse riding accident that severely damaged his spinal cord and was paralyzed from the shoulders down. Following the accident both he and his mother considered pulling the plug on his respirator and letting him die. In his biography, *Still Me*, Christopher Reeve

tells how he shared his despair with his wife, Dana. “I mouthed my first lucid words to her. ‘Maybe we should let me go.’” With tears in her eyes she told him to fight back and said, “I want you to know that I will be with you for the long haul, no matter what. You’re still you, and I love you.”

This is just one of many examples of the mystery of marriage. How do you explain it other than this supernatural reality of leaving and uniting?

When St. Paul wrote about marriage he wrapped a mystery inside the mystery when he said in Ephesians 5:31-32, “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

So the mystery in the mystery is not about marriage at all. It is about “*Christ and the church.*” This is amazing all by itself. Obviously, God is ultimately concerned about his Son, Jesus Christ. And God cares deeply about the church for which Jesus died. The Bible says that if you want to understand the relationship of Jesus Christ to the church then look at a marriage and if you want to understand marriage look at the relationship of Jesus to the church.

Every time the Bible refers to the church it is always referring to people—and always to Christians. If you are a Christian you are part of the church of Jesus Christ.

There is a wonderful *profound* mystery to the relationship between Jesus and the church. We are in love with Jesus and Jesus loves us. We are committed to Jesus and he is committed to us. We are so committed that we have changed our names to be like his! We are totally and ultimately dependent on him. He is the basis of everything in our lives and he is certainly the basis of determining our eternal destiny. The way we become Christians is much like the way we become married—we make a deliberate choice and a definite commitment at a specific time (getting married is usually with a wedding; becoming a Christian is usually with a prayer of commitment).

You may be thinking that just as you know about messed up marriages you know about

messed up churches. So, is this a good comparison? If I were doing this I might come up with another analogy. But this is the analogy God gave us, recognizing that just as people do not always behave well in marriage so people do not always behave well in churches. But the mystery of supernatural unity is still there. God gives his divine blessing and eternal glue to the relationship between Jesus and the church and he does the same thing within marriage. When it is bad it can be really bad, but when it is good it is wonderfully all that God wants it to be.

I will admit to you that I am biased by my own personal experience. I have personally had a wonderfully long and positive encounter with both marriage and the church. I love Jesus. I love Charleen. I love the church. I see exactly what the Bible is talking about in comparing these relationships with one another. They truly are profound supernatural wonderful mysteries from God.

Let's get down to the practical side of what we can actually do to make our marriages and the marriages around us into the kind of magnificent mystery God intended them to be. The list could potentially be long because it is often complicated. It is a somewhat different answer for every marriage because every marriage is unique. But we can probably summarize it with about half a dozen central points that are the launching pad for the kind of relationships God wants us to have.

Christ is first. For a marriage to be a Christian marriage Jesus Christ must be central. Blessed are those who keep Jesus Christ central throughout their marriages rather than scream for help when the marriage is badly broken. One study claims that when two Christians receive pre-marital counseling, marry in the church, attend church regularly and pray together daily the divorce rate is approximately one in 39,000.

A major problem encountered by people going into marriage is unrealistic expectations. Couples idealize their relationship, expect perfection and anticipate the best. While it is good to start out with high expectations, we all need

commitment in marriage to get through the difficult times. Blessed are those couples that are committed to marriage as they are to each other.

While marriage is fun and is intended by God to be fun, a successful marriage is also a lot of hard work. There are inevitable challenges. Marriages succeed when both partners commit "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health." One of the biggest problems is not that couples stay when they should leave but that they give up too easily. When our marriages sail through rough waters we need to let our commitment cause us to seek every possible opportunity to make that marriage succeed.

Christ, commitment—and friendship. We need to work on friendship. Remember what it was like when you first met—the hours you spent talking, the interests you shared, the friendship you built. Suddenly, she was interested in baseball. He started to read up on art history. You spent time getting to know each other's friends. You went out of your way to spend time together, to find common ground, to build your relationship. For a marriage to fulfill the mystery, friendship must be life-long.

John Gottman, Ph.D., is an author and relationship researcher. This is what he says:

The determining factor in whether wives feel satisfied with sex, romance and passion in their marriages is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple's friendship. For men, the determining factor is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple's friendship. *So men and women come from the same planet after all.*

Many people think that the secret to reconnecting with their partner is a candle-light dinner or a by-the-sea vacation. *But the real secret is to turn toward each other in little ways every day.*

Talk to each other. Better yet, listen! One of the most frequently listed reasons for extra-marital affairs is that someone listened. They were most attracted by a genuinely interested listening ear.

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Make time. One researcher claims that the typical married couple in the United States spends only four minutes a day in meaningful conversation. Think through what the other person feels as well as says. Feed back the conversation. Don't use listening time to prepare your next comments.

Forgiveness is at the very center of Christianity and it is certainly important to successful Christian marriages. While it is important to forgive each other's sins and mistakes it is also important to have a non-critical attitude toward each other. Forgiveness helps to make marriage a safe place. It gives the assurance that someone is always on your side even when he or she knows the truth about you.

Jesus sacrificed himself for the church when he died on the cross. That is the essence of the mystery of Christ and the church. In Ephesians 5:25 St. Paul compares the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for human sin to the sacrifice that a husband makes as an expression of love and commitment to his wife. The sacrifice of husbands for their wives is a gift that makes marriage succeed. Most of the time it is not anything huge. Rarely is martyrdom required. Most often it is the little things like giving up a TV show or getting up to talk in the middle of the night even though you are tired, taking time to buy an unexpected gift or doing what your partner needs to have done even though you are inconvenienced—and not resenting it.

Jonathan Edwards was an 18th century preacher, writer, philosopher and president of Princeton University. There are some that say Jonathan Edwards was the most brilliant original thinker ever produced in the history of the United States of America. He also had a marvelous marriage. But on March 22, 1758, Edwards lay dying in Princeton, New Jersey. He was away from his wife, Sarah, so he sent this last message to her: "To my dear wife, tell her that the uncommon union that has so long subsisted between us has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and will therefore continue forever."

To all who are married or someday will be married, may you have that "uncommon union"—and may the mystery of Jesus Christ and his church shine forth from your Christian marriage.

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