

Spiritual Power in Marriage

A new day is dawning in American marriage research. For decades marriage counselors focused their attention on marriages that had gone wrong and tried to figure out what could have been done differently. But now marriage counselors are shifting research from why broken marriages failed to why continuing marriages succeeded. So let's take a look at some important qualities of marriages that have happily lasted for 20 years or longer.

First of all, it's not that they have fewer health problems or job traumas than unhappily married or divorced couples. But, they are more likely to have a positive attitude toward the solution of those problems instead of sinking into depression.

The second mark is that they talk a lot; indeed, they may even argue a lot during much of their marriage. But after retirement they tend to mellow and accept their partner's traits that annoyed them for years.

A third characteristic of marriages that have lasted 20 years or longer is that they are optimistic that ultimately they'll make it.

Number 4 is that they share at least some activities and interests in common as well as basic values and goals. The underlying agreement appears to keep them bonded together despite jolting changes over time.

The fifth and final characteristic of marriages that endure is that these couples are much more likely to attend religious services or have a spiritual dimension to their daily lives than the unhappily married couples.

It's the last of these marks of a successful marriage that we will address here—the recognition that marriage is a spiritual relationship. For many people that's not the way marriage is viewed. They see marriage as either a legal contract or a sexual union. Certainly, those are dimensions of what marriage is all about, but marriage is much more. The Bible describes the spiritual relationship between a man and a woman as a mystery . . . it is extraordinarily hard to define but it is central to the success of marriage.

Amazingly, even for couples who have no religious affiliation, that spiritual dimension is primary. God instituted marriage and God wants marriages to succeed, so he seals and seeks to preserve marriages of Christians and non-Christians alike. Both the legal contract and the sexual union ultimately become expressions of the spiritual dynamic that must be there for a marriage to be successful.

The Bible strongly emphasizes the spiritual in the main teaching passages on marriage. Let's take a look. Genesis 2:18 and 24 tell us:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. . . . For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

Jesus said about marriage in Mark 10:9, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." It is God who glues marriages together and God warns against anyone trying to unglue and pull marriages apart.

Other verses about marriage that might be familiar are found in Ephesians 5:21-26:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

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Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.

Once we understand that marriages are spiritual we are ready to move to a second principle: God wants marriages to succeed. Sometimes we are tempted to think otherwise. We wonder if God's strict teaching about divorce is not legalistic and lacking in compassion. We think God just doesn't understand what marital difficulties and

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relationships are like. But the truth is that God wants marriages to stay together so much that he has written the rules in a way that keeps them together.

The notion of dissolving marriage because of “incompatibility” or “irreconcilable differences” is purely human invention and far from biblical teaching. God wants it to be difficult to tear a marriage apart so that marriages will stay together.

Painless separations and divorces are a myth. People sometimes ask why God allows it to hurt so much. Remember God is the gracious inventor of pain. If it were not for physical pain we would all have burned off our fingers, chopped off our toes and bled to death long before becoming adults. God graciously allows the tearing apart of a marriage to hurt enough that more people will avoid the pain and stay together until they reach maturity in their marriages and personal lives.

We may ask, “Why does God allow my husband/ wife to do what they do? If he is all-powerful, why doesn’t he make him/her do what’s right instead of what’s wrong?” The answer is simple but not always easy: God wants marriages to be good, but he knows it will never happen if he imposes his will upon us. So, he has given us the freedom to be righteous but the other side of that is the freedom to sin. He has given us the freedom to give pleasure, but the other side of that is the freedom to inflict pain. He has given us the freedom to make a marriage marvelous, but the other side of that is the freedom to make a marriage miserable.

Therefore, God brings pressures upon us and our relationships to move us toward righteousness, success and blessing. There are many verses that talk to us about this. Matthew 7:11 tells us that God offers good gifts to all who ask. In Malachi 2:16 we are told that God hates divorce. If that is true then the obvious corollary is that he loves marriages that stick together! We are told in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit guides us to the truth. And in Philippians 2:13 we read that “*it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*”

It’s a little like raising children. As a parent we love each one of our children. We do everything we can to make them succeed. We provide their clothes, food, shelter, books, games and everything we think they need. We encourage them, pray for them, take them to the doctor and dentist, help them with homework and push them in the right direc-

tion. But we do not dress them or write their papers or take their tests. It is their responsibility to take advantage of all the good we can give them, but the final outcome of their lives is up to them.

That is precisely what God continually does with our marriages. He gives gifts, provides encouragement, sets limits, prevents tragedies, teaches and even disciplines. But it is up to us to take full advantage of all that is done by the God who wants our marriages to succeed.

One partner cannot make a successful marriage! But one ingredient that one partner can give to a marriage that is the best of all is personal godliness. 1 Peter 3:1-6 tells us:

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

The assumption built into these verses seems to be that the wives addressed here have husbands who were not believers and did not positively contribute to their marriages. The teaching is that under those circumstances a wife is to be godly, live the right kind of life and demonstrate the power of God in her present situation. That is the very best gift she can give to her marriage.

The results of that are supernatural. Take a look at some of the most unusual verses in the Bible in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14:

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If a brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must

not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her husband.

That is an amazing teaching. It says that if there is a home where one person is godly and the other person isn't, the godliness of the one will bring spiritual influence, power and blessing to the ungodly marriage partner!

The closest comparison I can think of in ordinary life is fringe benefits. As an employee of Wooddale Church I am privileged to enjoy a medical health plan with benefits. Charleen is not an employee of Wooddale Church yet she receives the same benefits simply because she's married to me.

Apparently that is exactly what God is saying about the benefits of spirituality and godliness. It's not that the person becomes a Christian and has eternal life because of being married to a Christian, but the Bible is teaching that significant benefits of godliness and spirituality extend to the ungodly spouse. Therefore, be a godly wife. Be a godly husband. Live 100% for Jesus Christ. Maintain daily devotions; evidence the fruit of the Spirit; let the spiritual power of God flow through you into your marriage and home.

There is a couple I have known well most of my life. He grew up in a Christian home; his father was a pastor. She came from a religious home although I doubt there was much real understanding of salvation or the Bible. From the beginning their marriage was tumultuous. He never took a spiritual leadership role and never really reflected the background from which he came. So with her limited spiritual resources she began to pray. She has what she calls a "prayer chair" in her living room where she goes every day and prays to keep their marriage and home going. It has not been easy over more than 20 years but the success has far exceeded what I ever would have predicted. She has given her marriage the best gift of all: godliness.

The next practice in the renewal of a marriage is marital prayer, an oft missing ingredient. Let's go back to 1 Peter 3:7. This time the advice is specifically to husbands. It says:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious grace of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

The Bible here teaches that there is a direct correlation between the success of the husband's prayers and his relationship with and treatment of his wife. If I correctly understand what is here being taught, if a man treats his wife inconsiderately his prayers will be hindered to the point that God will not listen and will not answer.

Marital prayer is often a missing ingredient even in Christian homes. Sometimes I am shocked to discover how few Christians actually pray together as husbands and wives. They may do it in times of crisis, but they don't do it as a matter of on-going discipline in their relationship, therefore missing out on many of God's blessings.

Let's make a list of what we ought to pray for in our marriages. Begin with the renewal of your marriage commitment. Tell God you are committed before him to your husband or wife "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health." Regularly reaffirm your marriage commitment to God. This alone will powerfully impact your marriage relationship!

A second suggestion is that you pray for fidelity. Pray daily that you will be faithful to your spouse and he or she will be faithful to you. And not just in action but faithful in thought life as well.

A third suggestion is to pray for romance. Romantic love isn't everything in a marriage, but it sure is valuable. Daily ask God to keep the romance burning in your relationship. Ask him for ideas to fan the flame of romance. Seek his help to remember birthdays, anniversaries or other special events.

Pray for passion in your marriage. Pray that God will give to you a strong sexual desire for your spouse. Sexual relationships are extremely important in successful marriage, but even in the best of marriages there are different seasons. Regularly ask

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God to bless this area of your life. Ask him to instruct you in a growing and deepening sexual relationship.

Submit problems to the Lord. Every marriage faces problems, so whether children, sex, in-laws, finance, communication, schedules or spirituality—submit them to the Lord in prayer. Every day ask God to use the problems to draw you together and strengthen rather than weaken your marriage.

Pray individually, but also pray together. Some of these areas may do not easily lend themselves to prayer with another, but most of life does lend itself to praying together as a couple. Set aside a special time and place to pray out loud together. Share your dreams and disappointments, your plans and your problems.

If you do this I have two predictions. First, most couples will find it hard to begin. One or both will be a foot-dragger. One or both will find excuses. It will take spiritual courage and personal discipline to make it happen. But, the rewards will be dramatic. Because marriage is primarily a spiritual relationship you will discover yourselves drawn together spiritually in a way that will bring God's blessing, improve communication, enhance sex, solve problems and renew your marriage. For those who will really pursue marital prayer, the future is exciting. For those who don't you will miss out on much of God's best for you!

Finally, let's look at church life and married life. Steven Knock, a researcher at the University of Virginia, studied the link between religion and the family. He concluded that couples who regularly attend church are 42 per cent more likely to be married to the same person over a long period of time than couples who don't go to church. Obviously, just going to church doesn't make a marriage succeed. However, we may conclude that church life and married life have a positive influence on each other.

The reasons are many. The church encourages strong marriages and marriage renewal. The atmosphere is supportive of successful marriages. The church has other people with good marriage that are good models for us all. We are greatly influenced by the marriages we see around us. The church provides spiritual input that alters all areas of our lives and makes a person a better marriage partner. And, the church provides opportunities to minister together. There is great benefit in minis-

try together. We take attention from ourselves and our problems; we serve others; we grow as persons in a joint project; and we learn together.

Therefore, I strongly encourage couples who want their marriages strong and regularly renewed to take full advantage of church life. Attend church together. Sit together. Discuss sermons together. Build social relationships and friendships in the church context, largely through small groups. Whenever possible, share ministry. If both can sing, join the choir. Work in the nursery; help the needy; take on a project; team-teach a Sunday School class. Church life makes married life better and successful married life increases the productivity and health of the church and the increased productivity and health of the church helps more marriages and so on.

To make a marriage succeed is a great deal of work. You may be familiar with the long running musical play "I Do, I Do." It's the story of a couple from the day of their marriage until the later years of their retirement—their fun and their fights, their children and their careers. But most memorable to me were the words of the final song in the final scene where they sing together, "Marriage is a very good thing, although it is far from easy."

Making marriage succeed includes working at it, claiming all the promises, taking advantage of all the pressures God gives and recognizing the spiritual dynamic. Give to your husband, your wife, your marriage the greatest gift of all—the gift of personal godliness. Take advantage of all the opportunities God gives. Recognize that it may be far from easy but that marriage is a very, very good thing!

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