

Why Are Some Marriages So Good?

Researchers Robert and Jeannette Lauer studied 351 couples married 15 years or longer. Three hundred of the couples indicated both spouses were happy in their marriage, so they asked the couples to explain why they were happy. The four most common answers were: 1.) Having a spouse who is one's best friend and whom one likes as a person; 2.) Commitment to marriage and to the spouse; 3.) Consensus on fundamentals; and 4.) Shared humor.

There are over 55 million married couples in the United States. Perhaps too often we hear stories of the difficulties and problems in marriage, but there are tens of millions of married couples that have successful marriages and are happy. And it's important to ask why that is.

Marriage, in many ways, is more an art than it is a science. The ingredients of a successful marriage cannot be written like a mathematical formula. But there are some ingredients we can identify in just about every successful marriage.

Leading the list is love. I've been to many, many weddings over the years and I can't ever remember a wedding where the couple didn't say, "I love you", and when the vows did not include a promise that "I will love you for the rest of my life."

The Bible is quite clear that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. So it is almost unimaginable to think of a successful marriage where love is not present. Yet there have been some very successful marriages where love once was absent.

Listen to the words of one wife who was in a loveless marriage. She says:

Our marriage was on the rocks. I didn't love Robert. Then I began to ask, "How would I act if I did love my husband?" I consciously began learning his likes and dislikes. I prepared his favorite dishes. I joined in his hobbies. I bought surprises to put in his lunch. I gave him my love on every occasion possible. Now I love him with all my heart.

She learned the powerful lesson that love comes in two ways: feeling and function. Feeling is about emotions; function is about action. They are very closely connected to each other. The person who truly feels love for a husband or wife should act out that love in ways that are thoughtful, creative, sensitive, caring and seeking the best interests of the other person. Feelings should always lead to action. The person who acts in a loving way toward a husband or wife will have the opportunity to create or strengthen the feelings of love. The principle is simple: if you feel love, act lovingly; if you act lovingly, feel love.

Is it possible to fall in love with someone to whom you are married? Is it possible to learn to love someone you don't love? Is it possible to rekindle a love that has grown cold? The answer to each question is "Yes!" It may take work. It may take time. But it can and does happen. Love is as much a choice as it is a feeling.

A second ingredient on the list for good marriages is commitment. In fact, in some ways it could be argued that commitment may be more important than love because it is commitment that gets people through the difficult times in marriages. If commitment is strong it can generate love even when love has grown weak. Commitment gets couples through tough times when their love is stressed and tested.

Dan and Heather Delaney have been married eleven years and live in Chandler, Arizona. In a magazine interview they were asked, "How has commitment impacted your marriage?"

Heather answered, "Greatly. Without commitment to each other, to our relationship, to our every day needs, I don't believe our love for each other could continue to grow over the years like it has."

Heather had a wonderful insight: commitment is a key ingredient to a successful marriage.

Most marriages go through ups and downs. When both the husband and the wife are committed to the marriage and do not consider divorce an option, most will survive the crises and make their

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marriages work. When both are committed to the marriage they will take the good times as steppingstones to make their marriages even better.

Years ago a couple came to see me for counseling. During our time together I gave them a marriage inventory that we were using at the time. They were asked to complete the answer sheets separately and then return for a follow-up visit.

When we met again she said there was one thing she had to know before we went any further. She wanted to know how he had answered one specific question on the list. The question was, "Have you ever seriously considered divorce as an option?" In other words, what she wanted to know was whether he was committed to their marriage no matter what. Or, was he only committed part way and, if things didn't work out, divorce was the way out.

When there is no doubt about a husband's or a wife's commitment to marriage, that provides an atmosphere of trust, an atmosphere where there can be growth. But when the commitment is in doubt, everything else becomes tentative and dangerous. Where there is doubt about commitment, increasingly there is doubt about love as well and trust becomes conditional.

In good marriages there are two types of commitment: commitment to the marriage and commitment to the person. Both are extremely important to a successful marriage. Commitment to the marriage is really a commitment to God. Commitment to the marriage allows the person to change. Commitment to the marriage gives enormous strength and stability to the relationship.

Commitment to the person is also important. It is saying, "I believe in marriage no matter what and I am committed to you as the one I have married."

A primary proof of commitment is faithfulness. Sexual fidelity comes from commitment. The reason adultery is so devastating to marriages is because it shatters trust and says that commitment is not there.

Wooddale Church used to be located in the town of Richfield, nine miles from its present site. After long consideration the church decided to relocate, but we didn't know exactly when the move would take place.

Sermons are planned out at least a year in advance and the sermon series at that time was on Hebrews, taking a verse each week. It turned out that the first Sunday at the new location the verse

for that week was Hebrews 13:4, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

At first, that seemed like an inappropriate verse for such a historic occasion. But the more I thought about it the more convinced I became that it was really very appropriate. It communicated that teaching through the Bible was more important than the building. And it said that this church is serious about upholding faithfulness in marriages. So, the first Sunday's sermon called for marriage to "be honored by all" and "the marriage bed kept pure." Marriage commitment between a husband and wife is important. But there is also a responsibility that we all share as a church community to create an atmosphere that upholds and encourages commitment and fidelity in marriage.

A third ingredient for a successful marriage is change, and that is sure to happen because change is inevitable. Change can be very good, and change can be very dangerous.

Couples are supposed to know each other pretty well before they get married. They should share experiences, be seen as a couple, interact with each other's families, go to church together and discuss spiritual and personal values. But the only way to really know the person you are going to marry is to be married for ten or twenty years.

None of us is static. We change every day. We are influenced by other people. We grow older and mature. We have new and unexpected experiences.

Good marriages have husbands and wives that change together. Husband and wife both grow. They work at discovering each other anew every day. They try hard to influence each other's changes. They continually adapt. Marriage is not the same after 25 years together any more than a person is the same at age 25 as that person is at 50.

The Bible is full of biographies of marriages. One of the longest and most unusual marriages in the Bible was the marriage between Jacob and Leah. You can read about it yourself in Genesis chapters 29 to 49. Their story takes up 20 of the first 50 chapters of the Bible.

Jacob moved to Paddan Aram to find a wife. He met and fell in love with the beautiful Rachel. He went to her father and asked for her hand in marriage. Her father was a better businessman than he was a father and he proposed a deal where Jacob

would work for him for seven years; then he could marry Rachel. And Jacob agreed to it. It's amazing what people will do when they're in love!

Genesis 29:20 says, "Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."

After seven years came the wedding. The morning after the wedding Jacob had the shock of his life when he discovered that his father-in-law had switched brides and he had not married Rachel at all. He had unwittingly married Rachel's older and less attractive sister Leah. When he confronted his father-in-law, his father-in-law offered what I think is an inadequate excuse. He explained that older daughters are supposed to get married first. So because Jacob loved Rachel and wanted her for his wife he agreed to a new deal wherein he agreed to work another seven years for Rachel and he would have two wives.

Imagine how Leah must have felt. Her husband and her father publicly acknowledged that she was not physically attractive. They publicly acknowledged that the only way she would ever get married would be by trickery. Her husband publicly acknowledged that he didn't love her or want her but that he very much loved and preferred her better looking younger sister instead. It is hard to think of a worse set of circumstances in a marriage than those.

Well, the years passed with a mix of joys and misery. Rachel eventually died in childbirth and was buried in a special tomb in Bethlehem. Some years later Leah also died. Then comes the story of Jacob's own death in Genesis 49:29-33:

(Jacob) gave them these instructions: "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites."

When Jacob had finished giving instruc-

tions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Amazing! At the end of his life, he wanted to be buried with Leah. When Rachel died she was buried in a different and a distant place. But when his wife Leah died, he made sure that she was buried with his family. At the end of his life it was Leah whom he most loved. Leah, the unattractive one. Leah, the unloved wife. Leah, the one he had been tricked into marrying. Leah, the one Jacob had come to love most of all!

What happened? They changed. Their relationship changed, and the marriage that had begun so miserably ended so wonderfully. You see, marriage is not what happens. Marriage is what we make it. Blessed are those couples who change together for good.

Last on this short list of ingredients for a good marriage is grace. Grace is the giving of good whether it is deserved or not.

Christians are best prepared to have grace in our marriages because we have so much grace in our lives! God has been good to us. God loves us. God forgives us. God is gracious whether we deserve it or not.

*...marriage is not what happens.
Marriage is what we make it.*

Grace in marriage is that every day exercise of kindness, gentleness, thoughtfulness, generosity, forgiveness and goodness. It is anticipating her needs before she

speaks them and trying to meet those needs. It is loving him even when he is at his worst. It is making each other look good. It is building up the other person and not tearing the other person down. It is the stuff of which very good marriages are made.

I Corinthians 13 is the love chapter of the Bible. It describes love in terms of grace toward the other person:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Jim Conway was a graduate school classmate of mine. In fact, we roomed together for a while.

As his wife lay dying of cancer in the next room, he wrote a Valentine letter to some of their friends. Here's what he wrote:

This Valentine's Day is probably our last Valentine's Day together. You probably remember many "firsts" from your life. I remember our first Valentine's Day, our first date, our first awkward kiss, our honeymoon, and the first and the last times we ate out. I still wonder when will be our last kiss.

But life is not only made up of "firsts" and "lasts," life is held together by all of the stuff in between. But it's all the "in between stuff" we don't seem to care enough about. Yet it is how we will live the "in between stuff" that gives the meaning to the "first" and the "last" of anything in our lives.

For example, if you don't work on your marriage in all the in between years - - then it's going to fall apart. You'll have only bitter memories of your first dates and your painful divorce. If you fail at the stuff in the middle - - you lose it all.

So let me encourage you to hold that kiss just a millisecond longer - - and with a bit more passion. Say one extra kind thing to make your mate's heart jump with joy. Look for an opportunity to give an extra touch or pat. Make that extra call to your mate at home or on the job. Try to connect for a quick lunch. And above all, commit yourself to pray for your mate specifically everyday.

The Bible encourages us not to despise the day of small beginnings. In other words, don't ignore the small stuff. Our world says, "Don't sweat the small stuff." But I'm saying to you, "Yes, worry about the small stuff. Yes, make the little stuff special because it is the little "in between stuff" that is going to make your very last Valentine's Day really significant.

In other words, Jim Conway is saying we should let every tiny little piece of marriage be filled with grace.

From the Episcopal Church comes *The Book of Common Prayer*. Here is the prayer for married couples:

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all

grace, look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon this man and this woman whom you made one flesh in holy matrimony.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their faults, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Amen.

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