

## *Marriage Busters and How to Avoid Them • Hebrews 13:4*

There is a sobering line in the last book of the Old Testament. Malachi 2:16 reads, “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel.” When God says he hates something, it must be extremely important and God must be emotionally engaged.

We might think that the reason God says he hates divorce is because God is so distant from our human problems and doesn’t understand the pain of broken marriage. But, in reality, it is because God himself is a divorcee. Earlier in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 3:8, God is quoted as saying, “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.” God describes his love relationship with the people of Israel as much like a marriage in which God’s spouse repeatedly committed adultery. With a broken heart God divorced the one he specially loved.

So it is not only that God greatly desires for every marriage to succeed, but it is also God’s personal pain from the experience of his own divorce that leads him to say, “I hate divorce.” God wants marriages to succeed. He fights for marriages. He repeatedly calls on us to do everything we possibly can to make our marriages work.

Part of the process of making the most of marriage is to understand what the risk factors are, the marriage busters, and how to avoid them. Think of them as warning signals like the lights and gauges on the dash of every car. They warn if the engine is overheating or oil pressure is low or the battery is not recharging or the pollution equipment isn’t working. If we are warned we are more likely to take the action that will make a difference and lessen the risk. So I offer for your consideration eight potential marriage busters.

First on the list of marriage busters is different values. Having different values is a clear danger sign. II Corinthians 6:14 says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” While this is specifically talking about the issue of Christians being married to non-Christians, the principle applies to all marriages.

It also has a broader application in that it is a dangerous thing whenever any marriage partnership has values that are in competition with one another. It can be in any one of a number of areas. If one person in the

marriage values money and the other values time, if one values children and the other doesn’t want children, if one values honesty and the other is dishonest, the marriage may be at serious risk.

A second marriage buster is poor communication. When pollsters asked married couples across this country, “What are the leading frustrations in marriage?” poor communication was listed by 4% of the couples. That kind of surprised me. I thought it would be a much higher percentage. But I suppose that people who are poor at communication may have trouble communicating to the survey takers that they have trouble communicating.

Clearly, communication is important to every relationship. When one person doesn’t know what the other person feels, thinks or wants that becomes like a virus that spreads into every other aspect of the relationship.

There’s a simple test to determine if a couple has a communication problem. Ask! Does each person know what the other person thinks and feels and believes? Could one partner adequately answer almost any question intended for the other partner?

Of course, communication is more than talk. It includes emotional communication. Does this couple freely share their feelings with each other? Because when facts and feelings are hidden or withheld, there’s a tendency for the husband and the wife to grow increasingly distant and with distance comes isolation from each other. So, the crisis that will destroy one marriage may strengthen another if the communication channels are open and healthy.

Financial problems lead the list of marriage busters for many couples. Not necessarily because there is not enough money but because there is a basic disagreement on the importance of money and how money is to be handled. Money is the #1 frustration listed by married couples talking to pollsters; 17% of marriages have problems over money.

In our society money is a primary expression of values and self-worth. Many people would be reluctant to admit that they love money more than they love the person to whom they are married, but it is true. And the Bible says that the love of money is a root of evil. That is certainly true in too many marriages.

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Money problems may grow out of ignorance. Many couples have no idea how to budget, how to manage and avoid debt or how to set their priorities. Others come from families of origin that had very different styles. For example, I grew up in a family where I do not remember any time that my father did not have and use a credit card. I don't remember a time growing up where my father did not pay car payments. I'm not sure he ever paid off a car; he always traded it in and rolled the balance over to a new car payment schedule. By contrast, Charleen came from a family that never had one credit card and never had a checking account. They literally paid cash for everything! So we brought very different backgrounds into our marriage.

Ironically, couples that disagree about money to the point that it breaks up their marriage will rarely list that as the cause of divorce years later. What once seemed all-important becomes less important with the years.

A fourth marriage buster is inadequate time together. Couples born before 1965 are more likely to have conflict over money. Couples born after 1965 may have greater conflict over time. Time has become the currency of a younger generation. How we spend our time has become the measurement of what we consider to be most important.

Today when both husband and wife work long hours, discretionary time is severely limited and there is competition for it. If discretionary time is invested in different directions, husbands and wives start to compete with take-home-work, sports, outside friends, hunting, hobbies and other activities. When children are born, the competition for the little time available is often with members of the same family.

Marriages are relationships and relationships take time. If that time is not invested in our marriage relationships then they are prone to fall apart.

Sexual deprivation is another marriage buster. Not having regular sexual relations is so dangerous to a marriage that a section of the Bible is devoted to the topic. I Corinthians 7:3-5 is unmistakably clear when it says:

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. That is saying that lack of regular sexual relations

between a husband and wife is not only contrary to the Bible but is a dangerous marriage buster.

Calamity can also be a marriage buster. When a couple faces serious illness, the death of a child, severe financial reverses, a prodigal son or daughter, destruction of a home or failure in business — that couple may be at high risk.

Usually the reason calamity is so dangerous is not just because of what has happened but because of the different ways the husband and wife may respond. One may blame the other for what happened. They may grieve differently. They have opposite views about what to do next. One partner may be ready to get on with life and the other still needs a long time to grieve. One responds with hurt and the other with anger. Instead of calamity drawing a couple closer together, too many couples allow calamity to drive them completely apart.

Adultery is a huge and powerful marriage buster. It is extremely difficult to forgive, forget or get over.

Jesus was referring to adultery in Matthew 19:9 when he said, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." Jesus was not saying that adultery mandates the end of a marriage, but he was recognizing the awful damage that can be done to a marriage by an extramarital affair.

Adultery is a sexual sin of unfaithfulness, but that's not the worst of it. Adultery is the all-time trust breaker. It shatters vows made to God and to the other person. It crushes the trust relationship between a husband and a wife. When lost, trust takes an enormous effort to rebuild.

Is adultery survivable? Yes, it is. Many marriages go on to succeed and strengthen, but it takes a lot of time and work to heal the wounds.

Desertion or abandonment is in a category similar to adultery according to the Bible. When one person unilaterally walks out of a marriage it is difficult if not impossible for the other person to fix the relationship alone. I Corinthians 7 strongly encourages Christians to stay in difficult marriages but it acknowledges that desertion is a marriage buster.

When one person abandons the other it is usually the result of long term unattended problems, adultery or disbelief in Jesus Christ. Marriage counselors will tell you that too many couples wait far too long to get help. It is like going to the doctor when the disease is in its final stages. By the time desertion has taken place and one partner has walked out of the marriage it is very difficult for them to get back together.

What can a Christian couple do to avoid the dam-

age caused by these eight marriage busters? The answer is in a list of ten marriage builders.

First on that list is active Christian faith and practice. Both religious and secular pollsters will tell you that marriages where there is an active religious faith and a strong practice of it are far more likely to be strong and successful marriages. This includes church attendance, but it is much more. Couples should be connected to a Christian community so that there is regular support, encouragement, fellowship, instruction and correction.

Couples who pray together experience supernatural marriage building. So I ask you, how often do you and your husband/wife pray together? If it is daily, your marriage is probably a hundred times stronger than it would otherwise be. It really, really works!

A second marriage builder is agreement on values, interests and goals. This usually comes from setting family priorities. One way to do this is to separately make a list of what you think is important, what you like to do and what are your hopes and dreams. Each of you make a list; then come together to compare and discuss those lists and especially to find the common items on them. Pray over them. Then each of you be willing to sacrifice something you consider personally important so that the top values, interests and goals are the ones you have in common.

By no means is that suggesting that there will be 100% agreement. That never will happen. It probably never should happen. Husbands and wives should maintain individuality. However, effort to find points of agreement and common ground will pay off big time.

A third marriage builder is talking together and listening to each other. A couple of years ago I stayed for a week in the home of some friends in Indiana. Early every morning I heard voices outside on their screened deck. They were out there every day at dawn with cups of coffee just talking about everything. It was a very good marriage and I could see why.

Talking and listening means doing both. Set aside time for each to say everything he or she would like to say. It's not just talking. It's also listening, and being sure that you are heard and especially that you hear the other person. A very good discipline is to practice saying, "This is what I heard you say." Then feed back the other person's words and especially the other person's feelings until each person is satisfied that she or he has been heard. It is an investment that pays great

dividends.

A fourth marriage builder is kindness. Simple kindness goes miles to build a marriage relationship. One of the things that happens in every family is the development of the ability to easily hurt or help other family members. We all tend to become highly skilled in knowing how to push each other's buttons.

Most husbands and wives learn how to anger and harm each other with a single word or a certain facial expression. Likewise, most husbands and wives know exactly how to build up and help the other person with a kind word or action. It is totally a matter of choice. Those who build their marriages avoid the unkind and seize every opportunity for kind words and deeds.

I know perfectly well that if Charleen drops a dish or scratches the car I can say, "What's the matter with you anyway?" or I can say to her, "Cars and dishes and things don't matter. It's you I love and you are most important."

Kindness builds marriages!

A fifth marriage builder has to do with learning how to problem-solve. Every marriage has problems. No one is exempt. Some couples learn how to solve problems and others don't. Blessed is the couple that learns problem-solving skills.

The best time to talk together about your approach to solving problems is when you don't have a big problem to solve. Agree that you will:

- 1.) Agree on what the problem is, so that in a sentence or so you can say, "This is the issue that we're dealing with."
- 2.) List the resources that are available to deal with the problem.
- 3.) List the possible alternatives on how to approach solving the problem.
- 4.) Choose, at least for now, the best alternative to approach this particular issue.
- 5.) Try it. Apply that alternative as your first attempt to a solution.

Keep using this approach until it is a regular part of your marriage.

A sixth marriage builder is regular sexual relations. Regular sexual relations in marriage builds intimacy and bonds the marriage relationship. Talk about it and

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do it. Consider this a gift from God that is to be used freely. Count sex as something to give to each other rather than something to take from each other. Those couples that have regular and positive sexual relationships not only discover that this is great for their marriage but it is obedient to God and it is the right and Christian thing to do.

A seventh marriage builder is planning time together. Marriage needs to be about the future, not just the present and the past. That takes plans and dreams that can be implemented as a team.

In order for this to happen the couple usually needs to set aside planning time. It could be as simple as setting aside an hour a week, or maybe going out for breakfast together once a month, and talking through dreams and plans and how those dreams and plans could be turned into reality. What will take an extra effort at first can become a marriage-building habit of designing tomorrow as a team of two.

Willingness to sacrifice for one another is another marriage builder. Sacrifice is essential for a good marriage. There is nothing quite so up-building as the willingness of another person to give up something for us. As Christians we know that sacrifice for the other person is the Christian thing to do—it follows the pattern of Jesus Christ.

There are two sides to this. Every day deliberately choose to give up something for the benefit of each other. And, be willing to accept what the other person gives. Some of us are good at giving but not good at receiving. To build a marriage takes both. If she is thirsty and wants a glass of water, get it for her even if it means missing part of the game. If he is tired, rub his neck even if you are more tired than he is. Make sacrifice for each other a habit. Make it something special and exclusive to your relationship together.

The ninth marriage builder is dependability that builds trust. Few things strengthen a marriage like dependability and trust. Few things undermine a marriage more than broken promises and lies. Work hard at always telling the truth. Be diligent to do what you say you will do. If you say you will call when you're going to be late, call. If you say you will run an errand, write a note to yourself and don't forget. Honesty and dependability include more than moral faithfulness. They also include the little things of life.

Finally, build your marriage by using crises for good. When everything seems to go wrong, when illness hits, when family relationships are strained, when jobs are lost, when bankruptcy looms, when cars are wrecked, when stresses are piling up — believe that God can use the crises for good.

I've been told that the two Chinese characters that together make the word for "crisis" are the characters for "danger" and "opportunity". A crisis is a dangerous opportunity. Pray and work and talk together as husbands and wives so that the crises of life will draw you together, build your marriage, increase your faith and turn out for good.

Art historians say that Michelangelo, the brilliant sculptor, could take a flawed and cracked piece of marble and make it into a masterpiece. How did he do it? He studied what he had to work with, he carved around the cracks, he used the deformities as part of the design and he spent a lot of time and hard work. And the result — he left marvelous masterpieces for generations to come.

May your marriage be that kind of a masterpiece. Not perfect and flawless, but worth the work, worth the time, worth building and making good — a masterpiece for your enjoyment and for God's glory.

*God of every marriage, make marriages good and strong. Protect against the busters and multiply the builders. Give hope and heart to every husband and every wife to make their marriages better than they have ever been before. May each Christian husband and each Christian wife receive from you the power of your Spirit to make their marriage into everything that you want it to be. In the name of Jesus. Amen*

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