

Renewing Your Marriage

Realtors have a name for a property that has not been regularly renewed. They say that property is “tired”. We all know that a tired property looks like a worn out version of what it started out to be. Colors are out of date; the carpet is worn; the appliances are so old that parts are no longer available; the driveway is badly cracked; there may even be a distinctive odor.

Compare that to a century-old house that has been regularly updated. It’s a classic. It attracts you because it’s in such good shape. It combines the very best of the old and the new.

The same thing is true of cars. You can find relatively new cars that are scratched and rusted with mufflers dragging and cylinders misfiring. Yet a few miles down the road you may see a 30-year-old car that looks nearly new. It’s cleaned up, every nick and dent has been repaired and the paint is fresh.

The difference is in the owners. Some people who own houses and cars just use them but never renew them. They don’t change the oil until it nearly runs dry. They don’t paint the house until the siding is ready to rot. They expect the most without caring enough to regularly reinvest.

By contrast, other owners change the oil every 3,000 miles or less. They wash off the road salt every time the temperature goes above freezing or every six

months, whichever comes first. They tighten the loose screws. They replace worn carpet. They keep their cars as up-to-date as they possibly can, knowing that renewal brings years more of good use.

Marriages take renewal as well. There are very few, if any, marriages that automatically renew themselves. You can’t change out of your wedding dress and tuxedo and expect a lifelong strong marriage to happen all by itself.

We all know stories of marriages that break down after a number of years. After years of neglect, almost everything needs to be fixed. They are like neglected cars that need new tires, new engines, reupholstered seats, bodywork and a paint job all on the same day. In both cases, most people decide

they would rather junk what they have or make a trade-in on another model rather than attempt to repair something in such bad shape. Yet, in both cases, most people would be far better off if they had followed a process of renewal throughout.

For Christian marriages renewal is an especially wise investment. So I offer to you some suggestions on how to do that. The first is to start out by renewing your relationship with Jesus Christ because at the foundation of every Christian marriage is a relationship to God.

When Christian couples’ marriages break down, almost always one or both will say, “We drifted away from God. We didn’t pray anymore. We started skipping church; our spiritual lives became cold. God was no longer central to what we were all about.” You see, to have a strong Christian marriage requires that there be a strong relationship with Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Certainly it is much more than being born in America or having been raised in the church or baptized or con-

firmed or being a church member. To be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9-10 sums up what it means to be a Christian:

... if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

In other words, a Christian is someone who chooses to fully believe in Jesus Christ and follow him as the Lord of life . . . and says so!

To be a Christian also means behaving in a way that demonstrates that we are following Jesus Christ as Lord.

Let me tell you two common expressions of Christian commitment, both of which really aren’t fully biblical:

To be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

- 1.) *“I’ve always been a Christian!”*
That’s really not possible. It requires a deliberate choice to become a Christian.
- 2.) *“I’m a Christian because I accepted Jesus Christ on such and such a date.”* While this does indicate a choice to believe in Jesus, it gives the impression that faith is something that is done once rather than ongoing.

To be a Christian means to trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord *today*. Personally, I often reaffirm my faith in Jesus. I try to say so every day. I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord today, not based upon what happened yesterday. For today my commitment is to Jesus Christ. Christian faith should be regularly renewed and reaffirmed.

To have a Christian marriage is for both partners to have that kind of commitment to Jesus Christ and to follow him. A Christian marriage is one that is first committed to Jesus and then to each other. It is a relationship that is viewed as a triangle — husband, wife and Jesus.

This may be practically lived out in many different ways. It includes praying together and going to church together. But most of all it involves including Jesus Christ and his desires in every aspect of married life — finances, time management, children, sex, conversation and especially in decisions.

I strongly recommend that Christian couples regularly renew their commitments to Jesus Christ. Do it together. Say so. Actually look each other in the eye to tighten that knot of relationship to God and to one another.

A second suggestion for renewing Christian marriage is get to know the person you married. Marriages begin with lots of getting acquainted. The early months and years are all about discovering each other intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually. It is the joy of learning and the joy of shaping one another. However, after 5, 10 or 50 years of marriage you have both changed. There are many ways in which the person to whom you are married is a different person. Marriage is meant to be a lifelong process of getting to know the person to whom you are married.

A good place to start is remembering why you

married the person you married. This is especially important when life gets cluttered with the present because it is easy to forget why we started. Recall what you found so attractive about him or her. Get out some old love letters. Page through old photo albums and wedding pictures. Recall your marriage vows — listen to the tape. Remember why you decided this was the person God had given you as a lifelong partner. Remembering why is a powerful renewal tool in a marriage relationship. It takes us back to the beginning. It reestablishes the roots and reasons for the marriage.

At the same time, realize that the person to whom you are married has changed. The changes are not just wrinkles and pounds but maturity and personality. If you have changed together, define and discuss and celebrate those changes. If you have grown apart, make a major effort to discover all that is new and different.

Instead of just talking about the practical elements of a household like meals and bills, get to know the other person’s perspectives on life. Ask her the 10 ways she has most changed in the past ten years. Ask him what lessons of life he wishes he could pass along to the next generation. Ask about favorite colors, pet peeves, politics, books, movies and friends. Ask, “If you could write the script for the rest of life, what would it be like?” Or ask, “What should I know to better understand you now?”

Try to discover all God has done in you partner’s life. Do it to learn. Pretend it is dating all over again. Really listen. Don’t interrupt. You may find that you are married to someone with depth and beauty you never knew. You may find yourself intrigued and falling in love all over again.

Remember why and discover each other anew.

A third suggestion has to do with asking and assenting all over again. Sometimes I ask Charleen, “Will you marry me?” So far, so good! She has always answered, “Yes!” I love it when she says yes. Sometimes she will even tell me the reasons why.

It is not because our marriage is in trouble. It is not because the vows made long ago are now in doubt. It is just a way of saying to each other, “I’m married to you not only because of a ceremony and a certificate. I’m married to you not only because it is the right thing to do. I’m married to you because I want to be married to you. And if the decision

were being made today, I would marry you all over again.” That is a wonderful thing to hear from the person who is your husband or your wife.

Regularly renewing a marriage includes regularly romancing. Romancing is different for every person and every couple. It is doing what he wants; it is giving what she likes.

One wife spent an entire afternoon and more than \$100 buying greeting cards. Some were funny, some were serious, some were sexy. The cards were stored away in secret places at home and at work. Every envelope received a “Love” stamp. She was ready to romance with a card at a minute’s notice.

One husband regularly turns off or mutes the TV whenever his wife wants to talk. It is his way of saying to her that she is far more important than anything on the television.

Right now, think of something he might enjoy, something she would like, that would please, excite, surprise and bless your marriage partner. Go for it! Romance all over again.

Work to continually win the love and favor of your spouse. Stop thinking of marriage as a “done deal”. Most of us don’t approach our employment that way. No matter how much job security we have, it’s far better to go to work every day thinking, “I’ve got to win this job today.” A salesperson or a physician should never think of a customer or patient as guaranteed. Treat that person as well on the 100th visit as on the first visit.

Do the same when it comes to marriage. It’s a way of saying, “I don’t take you for granted. You are special and important.” You’ll know you are doing a good job when your partner says, “You really don’t have to keep doing this. I’m here to stay. You’re stuck with me.” But at the same time you know that she doesn’t want you ever to stop winning her over.

And don’t forget to ask. Actually, there are lots of ways to ask besides an annual, “Will you marry me?” One husband asked his wife, “What do you need from me more than anything else?” Try that question. Regardless of the answer, it is like a rocket booster to ongoing marriage renewal.

Find as many creative ways as possible to ask the question, “Will you be mine?” We all love to be asked. We all love to feel important. We all love the opportunity to be wanted and needed. It is a two-way street: husbands asking wives and wives asking husbands.

Agree all over again. Answer his questions. Give her your response. Even if it’s not asked, you can still give the answer. I know perfectly well the value of saying to Charleen, “Of the billions of women in the world, you are the one I want to be married to. You are the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. You are more important to me than anyone else. It is an honor to be your husband.”

Imagine a marriage where there is regular romancing and winning and asking and agreeing. That is a marriage that will keep on going and renewing better than the proverbial Energizer Bunny. It is a marriage that will probably never break down or

need a major overhaul. It is the marriage that is as up-to-date as today’s morning newspaper.

A fourth and a final suggestion is to promise all over again. Call it “re-vowing”, to God and to each other.

Marriage is meant to be a life-long process of getting to know the person to whom you are married.

I have witnessed renewal vows at 50th wedding anniversaries, after martial separation or divorce and in church services designed for the renewal of marriage vows. But it doesn’t have to be on a special occasion. You can just do it on your own.

Imagine the impact on children who regularly hear their parents renew their vows to God and to each other. That will wonderfully and positively shape their concept of Christianity and of marriage.

First, renew your promises to God. What are your promises to God? If you don’t know, make a list. If you know but haven’t told God for a long time, say a prayer or write a letter, but let him know.

My promises to God include an irrevocable commitment to love him and to live for him. I promise to always acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior and obey him as my Lord. I promise to read his Bible, commune with him in prayer, serve him in the church and in the world, to give of my resources, to share my faith, to honor my commitments and

try to behave Christianly in every circumstance, even when others behave badly.

Ideally, make your promises to God together as a couple. Say them out loud. Write them on a piece of paper and sign both your names. Pray those promises together.

And then promise each other all over again. Do not depend on vows once made and promises once given. Update your commitment with words like, “I love you. I will always be faithful to you. I will make you the most important person in my life. I will respect you. I am committed to you.”

When Charleen and I were married she said to me:

I, Charleen, take you, Leith, to be my wedded husband. I promise to love, honor and obey you. I take you for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to have and to hold, and will cling to you and you alone until death us do part.

She has spontaneously and often recited those vows back to me over the years since. When first spoken they were just promises in the form of words. But over the years I have seen her keep those promises — through better and worse, through richer and poorer, through sickness and in health. Now to hear them again is a wonderful thing to experience, for I know all the better and all the more that those promises will be kept, that those promises are true.

In our culture we have a time limit on how long it is appropriate to look another person in the eye. Even people who are our good friends, parents and children. We don’t just stare in somebody’s eyes; we occasionally look off to the side or blink because there is a depth of intimacy when we maintain a constant eye contact. Of all the relationships I have, there is only one person with whom I can totally and continually maintain eye contact, and that is my wife. Think what it is like to take the hands of the person to whom you are married, to look into her eyes, to look into his eyes, and to promise to keep those vows.

The renewing of Christian marriage is God-honoring and wonderful. It is the daily living out of the words of Jesus himself, who said in Mark 10:7-8:

. . . a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the

two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.

Father, I pray for the ongoing renewal of every marriage here today, for every marriage that is and for every marriage that will be of those of us who today now pray. I ask that you will be the foundation and the partner in every marriage relationship, that they will not be relationships that are unattended, but continually renew an intimacy and a directness and a wonder that is sealed and blessed by you. Amen.

And now may God renew your relationship with him and with one another and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be on you today and every day and forever. Amen.

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