

How to Be Happily Married

I have never counseled anyone before marriage who said his or her goal was to be unhappily married. And when I affirm my conviction that marriage is designed to be for a lifetime, they will look at each other dreamy-eyed as if to say, “Oh, we want to spend eternity together too.” If marriages, especially Christian marriages, have love for a lifetime in mind, what happens to far too many marriages that discourages them from their original long-term goal? Let’s talk about it. For marriage to last a lifetime and be happy while doing so, we need:

1. The Same Dedication

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30). This is the great commandment. If we don’t get this right, nothing will be right. If we do not love the Lord with everything we have, we have no business being involved in courtship or dating. Your relationship is doomed from the start if Christ does not have preeminence in your lives. *“And He (Christ) is the head...that in all things He might have the preeminence”* (Colossians 1:18). When Christ holds first place in our lives, every area of our life together is blessed. Our Lord said, *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus said, *“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:26). Our Lord is not teaching us to literally hate our parents, spouse or children; He is saying our love to Him must be so supreme that our love to others does not compare. In contrast we simply do not love anybody like we love the Lord Jesus. In the context in which this passage was given, Christ makes reference to a man who built a tower and does not count the cost first, only to find he was not able to finish it. And then our Lord explained that a man who went out to war needed to sit down first with consultation to see how he was going to win this thing. If we come to resolution together that Christ is number one in the marriage, we are counting the true cost of discipleship. The blessing of the Lord will follow and when we keep this perspective God will, in return, keep our marriage. For a marriage to start off without the understanding that Christ is Lord and He and the Word of God ultimately rule in marriage, we have no common denominator that gives resolution. I love what Dr. Robert G. Lee told my wife and me in the early days of our marriage, “I told my wife when I proposed marriage, that she would have to play ‘second fiddle’ to Jesus.” When he told us these words, he had recently lost his wife. He tearfully told us, “I don’t believe a man ever loved a woman better than I, nor did a woman ever love a man more than my wife loved me.” They had a love for a lifetime because they had the same dedication.

2. Self-Denial

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, *“Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me”* (Mark 8:34). If we take the nuptial plunge looking out for “number one” and how your spouse will satisfy your needs, your marriage is already flawed. I have heard

the suggestion, “write your needs down on a piece of paper and share it with your spouse.” Here’s a better idea: study the needs of your spouse and see how you may meet hers or his needs. For instance Peter said, *“Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered”* (I Peter 3:7). When the Bible says, *“...dwell with them according to knowledge...,”* that means study them, find out what they need. *“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another”* (Romans 12:10). This is the earmark of Christianity, *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others”* (Philippians 2:3,4). This is such an essential to true Christianity that the following verse after this admonition by Paul says, *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 2:5). When Christ came to this earth he had others in mind. John 3:16 says, *“God so loved the world that He gave....”* We can give without loving, but we can never truly love without giving. We deny self and give ourselves to our Lord for personal happiness; in the same way we deny self and give ourselves to our partner for marital happiness. I Corinthians 7: 3 and 4 says, *“Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.”* We should be looking for ways to fulfill the needs of our wife or husband. Happy is the marriage partner who knows it is not all about him or her!

3. Shared Interests

The servant of Abraham had a question when commissioned by his master to find a wife for Isaac, *“And the servant said unto him, Peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me unto this land...”* (Genesis 24:5). Abraham answered, *“And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shall be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again”* (Genesis 24:8). So Abraham understood that if the woman was not willing to leave father and mother and be joined to her husband in a land five hundred miles away, the servant is not to coerce her or even to bring his son out of the environment God had placed him in to search for a wife himself. Abraham was very aware that he was in the land God told him and his future family. If Isaac left the Holy Land in search of the wife, he jeopardized staying in the center of God’s will by leaving the place of God’s choosing to stay with his bride in her land. If the bride is brought to Isaac she is proving her willingness to have the same dedication to the Lord.

One of the happiest marriages in the Bible is the marriage between Ruth and Boaz. Before Ruth married, she forsook her heathen land, practices and people. One of the key ingredients to this successful marriage is given in the words of Ruth’s life-changing decision, *“And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God”* (Ruth 1:16). Ruth and Boaz had the same God, the same people. Happiness is having shared interests, especially when those interests revolve around serving the Lord together. I am convinced this is one reason we hear these words often sung at weddings, *“...whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”*

Some marriage partners peacefully co-exist with their marked differences, until the children come. Then war begins. Imagine Mr. and Mrs. John Doe met in church. Mary is a devout Christian who believes church attendance is mandatory, never optional. John goes because he was reared going to church, but borrowed his Christianity from his parents; he never “owned” it for himself. On a number of Sundays he would have abdicated church for a sports event or get together with some guys. Mary wanted to give more to faith promise missions. John was perfectly satisfied with giving only what was absolutely necessary. John goes along with regular church attendance and giving offerings minimally because it keeps peace with Mary. Then kids come along. Their little girl is asked repeatedly to miss church and enter into all manner of activity with her girlfriends. The daughter (as daughters can do) works on Dad. Dad fights for his daughter’s “rights” to miss church. Mom is not believing that John is serious! Why should John not be serious? He is not serious about God or His House of Worship. John Jr. wants a car. Dad thinks that if they hold back some tithe and save for the car, it would be perfectly alright. Mom is devastated that her husband will not stand behind her. But why should he? He does not guide his life by the Word, therefore he does not insist on his son doing so. Being unequally yoked is a stern warning in Scripture (II Corinthians 6:14). A criterion with which a couple will discover this is by paying close attention to your shared interests. This is much more than personality compatibilities; it is the difference between being happily or unhappily married.

-Pastor Pope-