

THE FIRST THING IN YOUR MARRIAGE
SELECTED SCRIPTURES

I've been thinking about marriage quite a bit lately.

I've been thinking about marriage because I've been working on my notes for the trip to Russia to teach biblical counseling, where I will be teaching several times on various aspects of marriage.

And I've been thinking about marriage because quite a bit of the counseling and discipleship I do is related to marriage.

And mostly I've been thinking about marriage because I am married and that means I think about it every day — and because Raye Jeanne and I celebrated our 30th anniversary this week, and we have been reminded in so many ways of God's grace in our lives.

And as I've thought about marriage, one thought keeps coming to mind — that the things that we all tend to put first in the marriage, really aren't first. And because we put second (or third or fourth) things first, we don't experience the kinds of joys and freedoms in marriage that we might enjoy. So this morning I want to remind us of the biblical principles of "first things" as they relate to marriage.

Here's the principle:

TO FIND YOUR GREATEST SATISFACTION IN MARRIAGE, FIND YOUR GREATEST SATISFACTION IN GOD.

The reason that there is so much discontent in marriage is not that husbands and wives are selfishly seeking their own pleasures, but that they don't seek their pleasure in God. Again, *to find the greatest satisfaction in marriage, find your greatest satisfaction in God.*

Our marriages will never be successful until we are (*I am*) growing spiritually. If I am not actively pursuing spiritual maturity then I am an anchor on my marriage that is not only keeping us from moving forward as a couple, but I am likely taking my marriage down to the ocean floor where the anchor rests. *Spiritual maturity and growth is not an extra in marriage; it is the core of it.*

Two additional notes:

- ✓ This message is for *every married couple*. No married couple has completely laid aside the deeds of the flesh and no married couple is perfectly sanctified, so there is something in these messages for every marriage, whether you've been married for one day or 60 years.

- ✓ This message is for *every person*. Every person has relationships, and the principles that guide and protect a marriage are the same principles that guide and protect every relationship. So you may not be married yet, or your marriage may have ended (with no future prospects). But these words are still applicable for you, because you still have relationships.

Let's flesh out the proposition, to find your greatest satisfaction in marriage find your greatest satisfaction in God, with two basic principles:

1. Make GOD the Center of Your Marital Life

- ✓ One thing matters in life — the GLORY of God (1 Cor. 10:31)
- ✓ One thing will lead you away from the glory of God — IDOLATRY (James 4:1-3, 8)

2. Be PROACTIVE in Building Your Relationship with God

- ✓ Ingest Scripture for the purpose of being transformed
 - The object of the spiritual life is TRANSFORMATION
 - Be transformed by cultivating a LOVE for God's Word (Ps. 1:2a).
 - Be transformed by cultivating the practice of THINKING about USING God's Word (Ps. 1:2b).
- ✓ PRAY for the purpose of cultivating a RELATIONSHIP of DEPENDENCE (Matt. 6:5-13)

1. Make GOD the Center of Your Marital Life

- One thing matters in life — the GLORY of God (**1 Cor. 10:31**; cf. **1 Cor. 8:6**; 2 Cor. 5:15; Rom. 11:36)

- ✓ What do we mean by the glory of God? Two primary ideas:
 - To glorify God doesn't mean we add anything to Him, as if we can "improve" Him. It means we reveal Him for what He is. So our actions and words demonstrate the greatness of God. "When the day ends, has He seen Himself in you? Have you radiated His truthfulness to others?"
 - To glorify God also means that we enjoy Him for who He is. The OT word "glory" means "weighty" or "heavy" — He is dominant over all things and all people and He should be *enjoyed* that way.
 - ... I borrow this illustration from John Piper: our anniversary was on Tuesday and I brought home two dozen roses for Raye Jeanne that day (a dozen red and a dozen white). Now suppose I came in the door with the roses behind my back, went to RJ, pulled them out and say, "Here you go: roses." "Oh honey, they're beautiful; why did you?" "Because it's our anniversary; I have to." Now is Raye Jeanne honored when I say that? NO!
 - ... But how about if I did the same thing, except when she says, "why did you?" I say, "I couldn't help myself — I saw the roses and they reminded me of your beauty; I smelled the roses and I thought of the aroma of Christ that is in you; I touched the thorns and I was reminded of all the hurts and sorrows that Christ has healed in our fellowship. I couldn't help myself — I had to get something for you that is worthy of your beauty and our marriage." Now is she honored? YES! Why? What's the difference? The difference is not the action — I "dutifully" purchased flowers in both scenarios; but only in the latter did I delight to do it.
 - ... That's what it means to glorify another — we honor him with our actions and we delight in him with our joy. And that's what it means to glorify God — to enjoy Him.
- ✓ Put these ideas about God's glory together and we discover that meaning in life is found in Christ (Phil. 1:21). Other things in life only have meaning as they are related to Him.
- ✓ Marriage only has value and meaning as it is founded and rooted in God (Eph. 5:22, 25, 32; **Tt. 2:5**).
- ✓ We do well to remember that in the entire NT, there are only 63 primary vv. on marriage (most in Eph. 5 and 1 Cor. 7). Scripture has relatively little to say to a husband and wife about marriage but it has *much* to say about the condition and character of a person's heart. The Biblical emphasis is not on being a better marriage partner, but on being a growing demonstration of God's glory.

Eccl. 12:13 The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.

- ✓ The puritan Samuel Rutherford said it this way: "God will have you to rejoice in nothing but Himself."

- Is the glory of God our priority in marriage? Yes. I was reminded of the direct connection between God's glory and marriage this week when I re-read Colossians 3. Notice 3:16-17 — the Word of God is to sanctify us, filling us with the Spirit of God, so that **whatever we do...to God the Father**. That's another way of saying, "whatever we do, we do to the glory of God." And what kinds of things does Paul have in mind when he says, "whatever?" Notice vv. 18-19 — **wives...husbands**. In other words, as Paul thinks about glorifying God, two essential places that happens is in our marriages and homes.

"Your marriage is more than a sacred covenant with another person. It is a spiritual discipline designed to help you know God better, trust Him more fully, and love Him more deeply." [Gary Thomas, *CT*, 11/21/01]

- It is important for both husband and wife to be believers (2 Cor. 6:14). But for God to be glorified in marriage is more than that; it means both husband and wife are living in the power of the Spirit and not the flesh (which is the very context of God's instruction on marriage in **Eph. 5** — cf. v. 18).
- When we say that Christ is the center of life, it is to say that Christ is woven into the fabric of every part of life. Life revolves around our relationship with Him, and He is welcome in every circumstance of the marriage. Practically, this means two things:
 - ✓ I obey Christ, working out my salvation in fear and trembling for the glory of God (Phil. 2:12) to be all that I can be in Christ. [My actions toward Raye Jeanne will quickly reflect whether or not Christ is central to me.] The greatest thing I can do for my wife (and children) is to **love the Lord with all my heart...** (**Mk. 12:28-31; Jn. 21:15-17**).
 - ✓ Spiritual life is central in the home. We labor together to create an atmosphere where the spiritual life is normal and accepted (this is fundamentally the husband's job). Cf. Eph. 5:25ff; **1 Pt. 3:8-9**.
- The center of my marital home, like the center of my life, is not my house, job, children, dog, or even wife. The center of my life is Christ. This is the first thing of life and the first thing of marriage. If this is maintained in marriage, all other things will follow.
- When we were in London we happened on a classic music concert at the church of St. Martin in the Fields. While the concert was terrific, the highlight of the evening was a 20-minute conversation we had with an usher named Sandy who was seated in front of us. As we talked, we discovered that he had a musical degree in concert organ. "What do you do with that?" "I play weekly for a church." "Can you do that for the glory of God?" "Yes — because the people worship for the glory of God." "What if the people aren't worshipping for God's glory — can you still play for God's glory, or is your playing wasted?" "I've never thought about that..." And that led to a conversation about the gospel and Christ's righteousness and that the only way he will ever be able to glorify God in his music playing is by trusting that God was satisfied with Christ's righteousness on the cross. The same principle is true in marriage — even if our spouse rejects Christ, we can live for God's glory when we reveal God by our actions and delight in God even when life is troublesome (and it too often is in marriage).
- We always live in every circumstance for God's glory. Our goal is to reveal His nature and to enjoy Him.

- One thing will lead you away from the glory of God — **IDOLATRY** (**James 4:1-3, 8**)

- ✓ Hedonistic, selfish motives will produce ungodly actions (v. 2 — ***so you commit murder***)
- ✓ Those motives are rooted in idolatry (v. 4 — ***hostile to God***).
- ✓ It is possible to exalt our ideas, wants, perspectives, and needs above the desires of our mates. That is idolatry. We end up destroying great things for the sake of little things.
- ✓ I saw this in my own heart early in my marriage when Raye Jeanne drew a significant amount of money out of a saving's account for the purpose of making a purchase that we hadn't talked about. And I was **ANGRY!** The root problem was not a financial disagreement but my desire to use funds in a particular way and I was willing to damage a relationship for \$1000.
- ✓ Even worse, in that same time frame, we had gone to a garage sale where there was an antique trunk that had leather straps and in perfect condition. We had no furniture and were in a small apartment, so Raye Jeanne said, "that's perfect for us — it can serve as a coffee table and storage." My response? "No way. It's a piece of junk. We don't need it. It's too much money." It was \$5. But at the same garage sale I was willing to purchase a bookcase made of 2x10s for \$5 because that was *my* desire. Now Raye Jeanne didn't get angry (though I certainly provoked her); and I did reveal again my idolatrous desires.
- ✓ What do you want so much that you are willing to sin (with anger, coveting, deceit, ungodly words, etc...) in order to get it? What do you desire so much that when you don't get it you sin? Those, my friends are idols, and they will lead you away from Christ and they will harm your marriage.
- ✓ When we worship and serve and live for something — anything — more than Christ, it will be a major detriment to our marriages. You cannot love Christ and anything else. Love anything more than Christ and you will not be a lover of Christ.
- ✓ Might I also submit that it is also possible to exalt the idea of marriage (in love with being in love), or even your mate, above your fellowship with God? That too is idolatry. Cf. **Josh. 24:14-15**.
 - Consider the young woman who is in love with the idea of the wedding and focuses all her attention on a day that she forgets the priority of marrying the right man and being prepared for the marriage that begins immediately after the wedding ends. She is in a relationship for a lifetime and she has only prepared herself for one two-hour event. Do you think there are ramifications for her idolatry?
 - Consider the young man who is in love with the idea of sex in marriage. He wants what he wants and because he idolizes sex, he compels his fiancée to compromise her morals to accommodate his sinful desires. How many men, when asked if they loved their wives when they got married might more accurately respond, "I think I was in lust more than in love." If that lustful desire continues unconfessed and untransformed, it will murder a marriage (James' word).
 - You and I will *kill* to get what we want. That won't glorify God; that won't lead us to godliness; and that *will* lead to a damaged marriage and home. We don't need a date night to fix that — we need repentance and broken-heartedness for our own sin, and an abiding satisfaction with God.

- If your marriage is troubled, the first step to fix your marriage, is to fix your fellowship with Christ. You need self-examination and repentance and the hope and joy of delighting in Christ. I always tell couples in counseling, “My primary goal in these sessions isn’t to fix your marriage.” (Their looks at me usually say something like, “Then why are we here...?”). And then I continue, “My primary goal is to help you to live faithfully to God and to glorify Him — and when you do that, regardless of what your mate does, you will be satisfied with life; and if you *both* do that, then your marital problems will be well on the way to being restored.”
- Friend, you may be convinced this morning that you aren’t living for God’s glory in your marriage. If that’s true, it may well be because you are not a Christian — a follower of Christ. To become a follower of Jesus begins by repenting, by admitting you are living for yourself — for your own glory — and not for God (that’s what we call “sin”). If that’s you, you can never please God or glorify Him and you are condemned by your sin.
- But Christ *has* pleased God and through trusting that He lived a perfect life of righteousness and that He died on the cross in your place absorbing God’s wrath against your sin, He will free you from the penalty of sin and the power of sin, so that you can begin living for God’s glory.
- If you are not a believer in Jesus today, will you repent of your sin and trust in Christ as your Savior? And if you want to talk more about that, would you talk to me at the end of the service this morning?

2. Be **PROACTIVE** in Building Your Relationship with God

- What is the greatest impediment to your marriage? Or to your dating relationship? Or to your relationship with your children? The greatest impediment is you. Why do you struggle so much with sexual temptation? It’s not because there are so many licentious commercials on TV. Those don’t help, but they’re not the greatest problem. I know the greatest problem in your marriage: it is *you*.
 - ✓ The problem in every relationship you have and in every temptation you face is not outside of you, but inside of you.
 - ✓ The world says our problems are all external to us (the things people do to us and the events that happen against us) and the solution is internal to us (we just need to visualize success...).
 - ✓ The Scripture says our problems are internal to us (flowing out of sinful, idolatrous hearts) and the solution to our problems is external to us (in the person of Christ).
 - ✓ Until you come to believe that you are the greatest problem in your marriage or in your relationships, your marriage will not change and grow (because you are not changing and growing), or (if you are not married) you are not ready to be married.
- So, the greatest thing you can do for your wife/husband/children is cultivate your fellowship with God.
- And if the greatest thing you can do for your marriage is to feed your own soul spiritually, then grow in Christ and be like Christ. The more you are like Christ, the more satisfying your marriage will be.

- (Your wife/husband may not change; but since you are changing there will be a growing contentment and peace about your circumstances — **2 Cor. 4:7-12.**)
- What then are we to do? How do we grow in Christ (Eph. 4:15; 2 Pet. 3:18)?
 - ✓ The spiritual life is hard, but not complicated. For example losing weight isn't complicated (burn more calories than you consume), but it is hard. Financial freedom isn't complicated (spend less than you make and always save something), but it is hard. I like what Gordon MacDonald wrote:

"The fact that we use a word like discipline in spiritual matters is probably an admission that life has a tendency to pursue disorderliness and laziness. Thus, we discipline ourselves to avoid this." [The Life God Blesses, 41.]

- ✓ What are the disciplines that will lead you to fellowship and delight in Christ? We speak about things like Bible reading, Bible study, Bible memory, prayer, fasting, evangelism, corporate worship, ministry and service, giving, journaling, "silence," and fasting. Feel overwhelmed?
- ✓ Let me simplify it with two fundamental tasks. Do these things with faithfulness and for their intended purpose and all else will fall into place.

- **Ingest Scripture for the purpose of being transformed**

- ✓ **The object of the spiritual life is TRANSFORMATION** — Rom. 12:2; **Eph. 4:22-24**. And the means for being changed is to have a new mind.
 - The state of your marriage and the state of your life is a product of your thought life. What you do is an overflow of what you think (**Lk. 6:45**). So if you are going to change, the first thing that must change is your mind.
 - And if your mind is going to change, then you must fill your mind with the truth. And truth is found in God's Word — "sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth" (Jn. 17:17).
 - So we want to take in the Scriptures (through reading, study, meditation, and memorization) with the one goal of being changed by that Word.
- ✓ **Be transformed by cultivating a LOVE for God's Word** (**Ps. 1:2a**). Instead of indulging in and enjoying evil (v. 1), the godly one enjoys God (and His Word)
 - **delight** = to have a longing for God's "Law" — listen to what the Psalmist thought of God's Word:

- 119:47 *I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love.*
- 119:97 *O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.*
- 119:113 *I hate those who are double-minded, But I love Your law.*
- 119:119 *You have removed all the wicked of the earth like dross; Therefore I love Your testimonies.*
- 119:127 *Therefore I love Your commandments Above gold, yes, above fine gold.*
- 119:140 *Your word is very pure, Therefore Your servant loves it.*
- 119:159 *Consider how I love Your precepts; Revive me, O LORD, according to Your lovingkindness.*
- 119:163 *I hate and despise falsehood, But I love Your law.*
- 119:165 *Those who love Your law have great peace, And nothing causes them to stumble.*
- 119:167 *My soul keeps Your testimonies, And I love them exceedingly.*

- Oh, friend, there is life and hope and joy and freedom in the taking in of God's Word. Now I get it. When the alarm goes off 30 minutes early our flesh says, "I don't wanna get up and read my Bible." Oh, but there is life in those words. And when you *genuinely* take in that word, you will never be disappointed by that Word, because that Word will take you to the One who can never disappoint you (1 Pt. 2:6). (That means that if you are disappointed with God or His Word you have not ingested it in a God-glorifying way.)
- Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" (Jn. 21). The parallel question is, "Do you love God's Word?"
- God has given us His Word to reveal Himself to us; He wants us to read it and know it so that we get to know Him and become like Him. To paraphrase one author, Scripture is not given to us to shape our barnyard morals, but to conform us to Christ. So says Jerry Bridges:

"The practice of godliness is first of all the cultivation of a relationship with God, and from this the cultivation of a life that is pleasing to God. Our concept of God and our relationship with Him determine our conduct."

[The Practice of Godliness, 23.]

✓ **Be transformed by cultivating the practice of THINKING about using God's Word (Ps. 1:2b)**

- **Meditation** means reading with comprehension, action, and change.
- **Meditation** is to reading what digesting is to eating — without it there is no nourishment.
- This is not just "devotional time," but constant mulling over God's Word and applying it to my daily situation.
- This is significant because it is what will consume us for all eternity (Rev. 15:3-4)
- This statement affirms that God's Word applied and appropriated is powerful to refute every evil influence on my life (Ps. 19:7-14; 2 Pet. 1:3).
- Let me give you five questions to answer that will help you read and meditate on Scripture:
 - ... The most important verse in this passage is:
 - ... This verse is important because:
 - ... One thing I learned about God in this passage:
 - ... One thing I learned about myself in this passage:
 - ... One thing I must do because of what I've learned in this passage: (e.g., what needs to change? for what should I give thanks? how should I think differently? is there a promise to believe? is there a prayer to pray?)
- And again, we practice these disciplines not to change our spouses or to help our marriages, but to become people who live for God's glory — revealing His nature and loving and enjoying Him.

- **PRAY for the purpose of cultivating a relationship of DEPENDENCE (Matt. 6:5-13)**

- ✓ *WHY* do we pray?
 - We pray because God is God and I am not — because *I* need Him (v. 8, the hypocrite doesn't believe he needs God).
 - We pray because *I* need to change — not because I am begging God to change my spouse.
- ✓ *HOW* do we pray? (Very helpful resource is John Piper's sermon, "Devoted to Prayer")
 - Pray for the edification of your own soul, not to impress others (v. 5) — and not primarily for the transformation of your mate (generally).
 - Pray quietly (v. 6) — like fasting, it should ultimately be between you and the Lord.
 - Pray genuinely and attentively (v. 7f) — each new prayer has new words (praying aloud helps)
 - Pray like Christ (isn't it amazing that we are given a means to pray like Him!) —
 - ... Pray, recognizing your fellowship with God (v. 9a)
 - ... Pray, recognizing the immensity of God (v. 9b)
 - ... Pray for and in light of the age to come (v. 10a)
 - ... Pray (always and only) for the will of God (v. 10b)
 - ... Pray for your daily needs every day (v. 11)
 - ... Pray for the forgiveness of your sin (v. 12) — like Newton, I can say that, "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior." The single greatest reason for the health and stability of our marriage is confession and forgiveness (with God and one another). Without forgiveness, our marriage would have ended in divorce years ago or been a place of bitterness and emptiness.
 - ... Pray for the protection of your heart (v. 13)
- ✓ The primary focus of our prayer is not, "God change my spouse," but "God, I rejoice in You and ask You to change me and give me wisdom for all things, including my marriage."
- ✓ In prayer (and in ingesting the Word), I acknowledge *my* need for God's transforming work. And in prayer and the Word, He changes me. And as He changes me, I become the man God needs me to be in my marriage and gives me contentment — even when the marriage isn't all that it might be.

CONCLUSION: What makes a godly church, person, marriage? Living for God's glory, the Word, and prayer.

- This message may have seemed a little unconnected to the topic of marriage. When is he going to get to "the good stuff?" This is the good stuff. Without this, nothing else in marriage will work.
 - ✓ Some of you have built your own homes (or have thought about it).
 - ✓ You didn't begin by installing the trim and carpets. Those are some of the final steps.
 - ✓ It is impossible to talk about marriage without first talking about Christ — if you have no vital relationship with Him, you will have no vital relationship with your wife or husband either.

- Let me remind you of the most profound statement about your marriage: your marriage is for the glory of God.
 - ✓ That's another way of saying, "To find the greatest satisfaction in marriage, find your greatest satisfaction in God."
 - ✓ If you are married, you are in a relationship that is potentially the most fulfilling, rewarding, exhilarating and satisfying of any relationship on earth. And it will be most satisfying only when you learn to glorify God above all else. And if you desire to be married, you have a good and godly desire; but it will only be ultimately satisfying when you learn to glorify God above all else.
 - ✓ And if your marriage is not healthy today, there is hope that by Scripture and prayer, you can change, and as you change, you will be more content in your marriage, even if your spouse doesn't change.

"...marriage is ultimately about God. Moreover, marriage is most amazing not because it brings people joy, or allows for a nurturing environment for children, or because it stabilizes society (even though it does all those things). Marriage is awesome because God designed it to display his glory." [Harvey, *When Sinners Say, "I Do,"* 27-8.]

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25