

“DID YOU MARRY THE RIGHT PERSON?”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

I Cor. 13:1-8a

The young man sitting across from my desk didn't mean to be funny. As a matter of fact, he was deadly serious. But I must admit his comment provokes a hearty laugh. In referring to his marital problems he said, "You know, marriage is like a cafeteria. You pick out what you want and pay for it later."

He and his wife had only been married a few years and their relationship had already become a case of first, friendship then courtship, and finally battleship. They hadn't reached a level of full partnership.

After several months of mental and spiritual anguish, he finally got enough courage to say what he had been thinking for a long time -- "I made a mistake. I married the wrong person."

We talked a little about his problem and, after his first mood of belligerence had subsided, he expressed a terrible sense of guilt for feeling as he did. He knew divorce was wrong. Everything they that had ever taught him, all of his training, all of his beliefs, all of his ideals where against separation. Yet, here he was actually talking about a divorce. And, to even contemplate such a thing, was to him, a sin of first magnitude.

When I told him his thoughts and feelings were quite common, that many, if not all, married folks had at sometime or other given thought to separation or even divorce, he refused to believe it.

"Those people never really took their marriage vows serious," he argued. Such marriages could not possibly be made in heaven. Take his parents, for example, they had been married for over thirty years. He had never heard a cross word between them. Their trip across the sea of matrimony had occasioned hardly a ripple.

I acknowledged that his mom and dad might be the exception that proved the rule, but I

suggested that before our next conference, he chat with them about the early years of their marriage.

When we met a week later, his attitude had changed completely. His face bore a look of stunned, amazement. Not one, but both of his parents had game fully admitted that in those first years, long before he arrived on the scene, they had shared their times of crisis too. In fact, his mother told him with a jolly laugh with only hindsight could provide, she had tearfully returned to her mother, not once, but twice! As he related their conversation he concluded with a note of wistfulness in his voice, “Maybe, there is hope for us.”

Well, of course. Of course there is hope for them. And, if you are here this morning with questions about your marriage, wondering if you made a wrong choice in the selection of a life mate, let me say there is hope for you too, if you are willing to pay the price, if you are willing to make the effort.

Everything worth having, has its price. We must always lose a lesser value if we would gain a greater value. Every struggle has its point of tedium, that moment of potential surrender which must be passed before any real accomplishment can be won.

A long distance runner must survive such a moment of potential surrender just before he gains his second wind. It feels as if his lungs will surely burst. But, it is only after he has struggled past the temptation to quit that his second wind comes and he is qualified and equipped to finish the race.

It is so in marriage. Marriage is not a hundred-yard dash. It is an endurance run. To succeed in it, we must struggle past the point of tedium. The moment of perpetual surrender. Only then, are we prepared for the deeper joys of marriage at its best.

To be sure, that will not be easy. Someone has said --

“All marriages are happy. It is the living together afterwards that causes all the trouble.”

A friend of mine said, “Marriage is like deer hunting. It is after you pull the trigger that the real work begins.”

I got a chuckle out of the farmer who had fattened a pig for a special occasion. One day his wife said, “John, tomorrow will be our silver wedding anniversary. Let’s kill the pig.”

The farmer retorted, “Why kill an innocent pig for what happened twenty-five years ago?”

Well, we may kid marriage a bit, but let us remember that good taste demands that we only kid that which is good. And marriage is good! It is ordained of God. It is a heaven-blessed relationship which can bring great bliss into the lives of those involved. But, if marriage is to be that kind of joyous arrangement, both husband and wife must be willing to face up to the harsh, hard fact that marriage is a lifetime job in which both of them must constantly submerge their own whims and wants and ways *for the sake of the common good*.

Well, did you marry the right person? I am sure there are many who would respond with an eager and earnest, “Yes!” Oh, they have periods of conflict. They have times of crisis, but by in large, they are content with the choice they have made. They are like the woman who was asked if she had ever considered divorce. She answered, “Divorce? No! Murder? Yes!” Indeed! Whenever there are two intelligent, sensitive, energetic people put in tandem there will be times of tension.

If that is true of you, may I suggest that you seek out ways to say it and show it to you life mate. For the flame of love will die unless it is constantly fed by the fuel of thoughtful words and deeds.

Say It

The Farmer’s Almanac has been quoted as saying that:

“The height of injustice comes when a man who hasn’t kissed his wife for five years,

shoots the man who has.”

It seems to me there is some good advice in that bit of homely humor. We all need to reckon with the fact that repeating the marriage vows does not mean further courtship is unnecessary.

Instead, those vows prepare the way for courtship to remain complete. And yet, again and again, I talked to a couple who, though happy with their choice of life mate, are literally starving for a little bit of love. One wife said to me sometime ago,

“I know he loves me. If only he would say it!”

I think we men are the prime offenders here. For some reason or another some men seem to feel any overt expression of love is a sign of weakness. As one man said to me if I asked him whether or not he had told his wife he loved her, “If I said something like that, she’d think I’d gone crazy.”

There are many men who struggle long and hard to provide their wives with the “stuff” of life. They pride themselves on being “good providers” but they are failing to give their wives one thing they desire most -- a free and natural expression of love.

Emotional non-support can be every bit as serious as financial non-support. As a matter of fact, there are many couples who have weathered a financial storm because of a freely expressed love between them. But, believe me, no marriage can really have much meaning if a man or wife is willing to take love for granted, and thus allow the fragile flower of affection within his or her partner’s heart to wither and waste away.

Husband, if you love her, tell her so. Wife, if you love him, tell him so. Make your love so plain, so transparent, so wonderfully obvious, that, if tomorrow morning the choice of a life partner were to be made all over again, each of you would choose the other.

But it isn’t enough to say it. You must also show it. Countess Clarita de Forceville has well said,

“If marriage is the foundation of happy marriages, good manners are the walls and the

roof.”

There is a stability and serenity about a home where both husband and wife have come to realize that love must be demonstrated as well as declared. You can't help but sense that here is a couple that have found the real meaning of love.

I was in such a home not long ago. It was a joy just to be there. As I watched each of them putting themselves out for the sake of the other, as I observed the unconscious expression of affection between them, I couldn't help but breathe a silent prayer of thanksgiving that I was privileged to spend even a few minutes in such a place. The aura of love was everywhere. When I left, I believed that I did so as a better man and husband for having been there.

You see, love like a flower, needs careful cultivation. It needs frequent watering of helpful deeds. It needs the warm sunshine of thoughtful, unexpected acts. It needs the elevating influence of expressions of confidence and encouragement.

And yet, you'd be surprised how many married folks fail to give their mate the backing and inspiration he or she needs. And, if the men are at fault for failing to say it, many women are at fault for failing to show it.

When I announced this series of sermons, someone laid this little quote on my desk,

“Any married couple can live happily ever after if the woman loves her man so much she wants him to be bigger than he is.”

Isn't that wonderful? Let me repeat it --

“Any married couple can live happily ever after if the woman loves her man so much she wants him to be bigger than he is.”

Unfortunately, some wives wear blinders for virtues and use a microscope for faults. To them

nothing looks right. And as a result, they have an enervating influence on their husbands. If only she would help him become bigger than he is.

Someone said,

“A wife who claims she can read her husband like a book rarely does. Instead of skipping over what she doesn’t like, she goes over it and over it and over it . . . ”

Well, we can laugh and that is good. But believe me, life is too short to be little. It is too brief to be vindictive. It is too fleeting to be selfish and self-centered.

If you feel you married the right person, declare it. Demonstrate it. Now. Today. Tomorrow may never come. Yes, in response to the question, “Did you marry the right person?” *If* you can answer an eager honest, “Yes!” don’t keep it to yourself. Say it. Show it. Let your life mate know it. For, in having such a heaven-blessed home, you are rich indeed.

But there may be some here this morning who cannot answer, “Yes.” They are not ready to respond with a categorical “No.” They are unsure. They have feelings of doubt. They just don’t know whether or not they made a wise marriage.

If you are one of those, let me say a few of the things I said to that young man I mentioned at the beginning of this message. (The one who felt sincere doubts and wondered if he had married the right person). To begin with, let me urge that you --

Review Your Concept of a Successful Marriage

Most storybooks end with the hero and heroine together at last in the calm assurance that “they lived happily ever after.” But real life is seldom that simple. No one, be they married or unmarried, is happy all the time.

“Every life is a little plot of flowers and brambles, a path of sunshine and mud puddles,
A mine where the occasional diamonds of brilliant happiness are surrounded by tons and

tons of monotonous clay.”

If you are vaguely, or perhaps even definitely, discontented with your marriage, it may be that you expected too much of marriage. You are living by false standards. Expecting something that can never be. I would urge that you review your concept of a happy home so it can be brought in line with reality.

Actually, there is no such thing as a perfect match. In fact, I’ve only met one couple that you could say were really, perfectly mated. She was deaf and he snored. But such unusual amalgamations are rare, indeed.

Unfortunately, most of our novels and movies lead young people to believe that in marriage, the first blush of love will last forever. As a result, when the thrill of the honeymoon has passed and they wake up one morning to realize they are stuck with each other, they become unsettled. Uneasy. Uncommunicative. And, often, they begin to look around, seeking a new thrill. A new enticement. They fail to realize that the time will come when the glamor will go out of that new love just as it went out of the old. Marriage is not a state of “sugary sweetness, moonlight and poetry all framed within the lacey borders of a sighing valentine.” It consists of grim realities. It calls for unbelievable effort and incredible sacrifice.

Suppose we went into two homes in our community, and took half of the living room furniture from one home and half of the other, and put these two halves together in a third living room totally unrelated to either one of them. To expect that jumble of things to automatically adjust itself into a decorator’s dream would be akin to believing in black magic.

And yet, that is about the measure of maturity some people bring into marriage. They seem to think that the wedding ceremony marks the conclusion of this phase of life when, in reality, it marks the beginning.

They seem to feel there is something magic about a minister intoning the words, “I pronounce you man and wife.” They fail to reckon with the fact that repeating the marriage vows is no guarantee of success. They plunge headlong into the incredible intimacies of marriage only to discover that marriage is not just peaches and cream. It also consists of Bon Ami and elbow grease.

When they make *that* startling discovery, the consequent *growing* pains are all too often substituted by *going* pains. You see, when two people enter into marriage, they enter into a new world. When I listen to a young couple exchange their vows, I sometimes wonder if they really understand the vast Alpine peaks of distress and difficulty, the Siberian deserts of disappointment and discouragement through which they must pass before they enter into the dominion of delight. For, while it is often said marriages are made in heaven, in many cases the initial impulse does *not* come from there. The simple, unromantic, rather mundane fact remains that, in reality, the real work is done right here on earth, by a real man and a real woman who have determination and courage and faith enough to face whatever real problems real life brings. And, through the surrendering of their own wants and wills and ways, they learn to become that perfect unity of being which the Bible calls “one flesh.”

It was Matthew Arnold who said,

“Perfection is not having and being, but an eternal *becoming*.”

So, too, with marriage. It is an eternal becoming. An endless striving toward that better, finer, nobler way which is the way of love.

And then, when you have reviewed your concept of a successful marriage by bringing it into line with reality, I would suggest that you

Recognize the Real Meaning of Incompatability

Incompatability is a big word. It often frightens us. But its meaning is quite simple. It begins with a capital “I” and that’s all we need to know.

If we are ever going to overcome the differences which divide us we must be honest enough to

admit that it is an unwillingness to surrender that “I” which is the basis of most of our problems.

We have often heard it said that marriage is a fifty-fifty proposition. I am not so sure. I have heard about one wife who agreed to go fifty-fifty with her husband and, during an argument one day she said, “I’ll meet you half way. I’ll admit that I am right, if you’ll admit that you’re wrong!”

No, fifty-fifty isn’t enough. It must be sixty-sixty or eighty-eighty or even one-hundred percent to one-hundred percent. To get fifty-percent in a subject at school is to fail. To have a fifty- percent love is to fail, also. It takes a hundred percent love to conquer incompatibility. A lesser love will never conquer the “I” with which incompatibility always begins.

Perhaps I can illustrate this truth with a story from the files of the Department of Agriculture. It seems that a man wrote to that particular agency for advice about the dandelions which sprinkled his lawn. In a series of letters the Bureau informed him of various ways of getting rid of the pesky little things. But, being dandelions, they stubbornly stayed on. Finally he wrote, “I have tried every method you have suggested without success. Have you any further advice about dandelions?” The answer came back, “We suggest that you learn to love them.”

That’s it! That’s how we are going to overcome the differences that divide us. That is how we are going to be able to live with the faults and weaknesses of our partner. We must learn to love them! We must remember that we have a few dandelions of our own, perhaps even a thistle or too.

And, after all, that’s where we really need to begin: in our own heart and life. Rooting out the weeds of selfishness and self-centeredness which choke the flower of our love. As someone has suggested, “Correcting faults is like tying a necktie or bow. We can always do it easier on ourselves, than we can on the other fellow.”

And then, by having renewed your concept of a successful marriage and having recognized the

real meaning of incompatibility, if all else fails you must

Remember the Sacredness of Your Marriage Vows

Those were solemn words that you pledged to each other. You stood before Almighty God and swore,

“To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, ‘till death do us part.”

That was not a nursery rhyme you were repeating. It was one of the most solemn and sacred ceremonies known to mankind, and it must not be casually cast aside.

I don’t mean to suggest that divorce is never permissible. Even the New Testament doesn’t say *that*. But, the New Testament *does* make it clear that incompatibility is not an adequate reason for divorce.

There will always be problems. There will always be disappointments, disillusionments, and discouragements where human personalities are involved. But the answer to those problems does not lie in dissolving the relationship. “A marriage license does not carry a money-back guarantee.”

As someone has said with profound simplicity,

“It is a last will and testament in which you bequeath yourself to another forever. It is a vow in which you pledge to walk arm-in-arm with another along the road of life, no matter what lies beyond each bend. It is a declaration of love so deep that it says and means, ‘Till death do us part.’”

By its very nature marriage is not perfect, but it is permanent. And, like the wedding ring on your finger, remains pure gold, solid and true, long after the gleam and glitter of temporary newness has worn away.

You say you made a foolish marriage? Well, that is something for which you may or may not be to blame. But, as Dr. William Lyon Phelps of Yale pointed out,

“The real test of character is not whether you have made a foolish marriage, but after that foolish marriage has been made, whether or not you possess the stamina and stuff to turn that failure into a success.”

You say that you possess such stamina and stuff? Then remember that with Christ you are “more than conqueror.” That through him you can “do all things.” He cannot only transform your life, he can transform the life and personality of your partner too. He can make “all things new.”

So commit your heart and your home to him. Include him in your plans and problems. And, as you do so, a new factor will be added. The factor of divine love which bridges the differences that divide. And, as the years roll by, you will discover that, by God’s grace and goodness,

friction can be reduced to a fraction.