

After You Say “I Do”

Matthew 19: 4-6

3rd of 6 in *Built to Last: Christian Marriages that Endure*

01 24 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

In 1970, Karen and Richard Carpenter released their second album entitled “*Close to You*.” The title track became *The Carpenters*’ first gold record. The brother/sister duo eventually became the biggest selling group of the 1970s.

The record included another song with an unusual background. Crocker Bank in California had produced a TV commercial about a young couple getting married. Roger Nichols and Paul Williams wrote a song for the ad. When Richard Carpenter heard the tune, he felt it had potential. *The Carpenters* recorded the song, and “***We’ve Only Just Begun***” became their all-time greatest hit.

The song became THE wedding anthem for a generation. I attended countless ceremonies that featured Karen Carpenter “wantabes,” crooning: “*White lace and promises, a kiss for luck and we’re on our way. And yes, we’ve just begun.*” The words are sugary sweet. However, the lyrics point to a critical reality in marriage.

I. Marriage Maintenance

A wedding is only the BEGINNING of a lifelong adventure. Couples who vow “*till death do us part*” must work diligently to create a marriage that is “*built to last.*” REAL marriage begins AFTER we say “*I do.*”

An owner’s manual for a car includes a **maintenance schedule**. Now a car will run fine without maintenance . . . for a while. Over time, however, oil loses viscosity. Tires wear thin. Fluids get low. Belts fray. And sooner or later, the car will break down.

Marriages also require a **maintenance plan**. Otherwise, the heat and friction of two people living together can cause the relationship to sputter, stall, and break down. Christian marriages that endure require five elements:

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| 1) Love | 3) Communication | 5) Faith |
| 2) Submission | 4) Romance | |

II. Feeling Versus Willing

A critical key to Christian marriages is a **mature understanding of love**. Most if not all marriages begin with unrealistic expectations. Starry-eyed couples say “*I do*” and assume that “*happily ever after*” naturally follows.

A question I often ask in premarital counseling is, “Why do you want to get married?” The couple will sigh and say something like, “We’re in love.” “I just cannot live without him.” “She’s all I think about.” “We cannot stand to be apart.”

That’s sweet . . . but that’s not enough!

Our culture often confuses **infatuation** with love. Infatuation is blind drunk on feelings. It is a temporary, emotional state caused by physical attraction. It can easily blind couples to one another's faults and flaws.

Love is blind, but marriage is a real eye opener! Couples don't know one another until AFTER the wedding. Then the journey from infatuation to love hopefully begins.

In stark contrast to infatuation, **true love** is stone cold sober. It is a willful devotion to another that rejoices in the rush of feelings but also perseveres when those feelings ebb and flow. Love sees the other person "as is" and loves them just the same. We accept and love our spouses with their virtues and vices, dimples and warts, strengths and weaknesses. And they promise to do the same for us.

NOWHERE in a wedding ceremony is a couple asked, "Have you fallen in love? Do you blush at the touch of your hands? Does the room spin when you kiss?"

Instead, the minister asks: *"Will you have this woman/man to be thy wedded wife/husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honor and keep her/him in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only unto her/him as long as you both shall live?"*

And the person responds by saying, **"I WILL."**

Love is both **FEELING** and **WILLING**. The emotional high of falling in love is wonderful; but feelings only get a couple over the threshold. Eventually infatuation fades away. And here's the danger: those who fall in love can just as easily fall back out.

In premarital counseling, I tell couples that some day in the unforeseeable future they will wake up one day and not FEEL in love. Of course, they look at me like I've lost my mind. Sooner or later, however, each couple hits that wall.

I remember one young bride who eventually discovered this reality. A few months after the wedding she found herself wondering, "When is he going to go home?"

Mature loves that says *"I will"* must take infatuation's place. Marital vows affirm that I will love you when I don't feel in love. I will love you when you are unlovable. I will love you when tempted by other affections. I will love you till *"death us do part."*

A husband will love his wife in the evening when she is a vision and in the morning when she is a sight! A wife will love her husband holding hands before the wedding altar and holding his head over the commode when he's sick! THAT is real life!

And here is good news: when we act in love towards others even when we don't feel in love, a miracle occurs. We eventually act ourselves back into the feeling of love.

A successful, long lived marriage requires couples who are both feeling and willing. Emotional infatuation will ebb and flow over time; only willful love can survive. There is no other way we can stay true to our vows *"for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."*

The word that sums up the wedding ceremony and the marital relationship is **commitment**. We enter into a covenant with spouse and God. We pledge to live for someone other than ourselves. True love requires great sacrifice revealed in adversity—a willingness to give without thought of the cost.

III. Mutual Submission

A second key to making Christian marriages last is the principle of **mutual submission**. In Ephesians 5: 21, Paul introduced a section on family relationships with the words: “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” The word “submission” has negative connotations in today’s society; but it is a Biblically-based principle of laying down our lives daily for those we love the most.

When I served my first church in Newnan in the 1980s, Turkey Creek Road had a one-lane bridge east of town. A “**Yield**” sign at one end of the bridge warned cars to stop to let oncoming traffic pass. On the other end of the bridge was ANOTHER “Yield” sign! Traffic in BOTH directions was directed to “Yield” to the other side.

This is the principle of mutual submission. We yield our lives to a Christ-like love that seeks the other’s best. When people insist on their own right of way, sooner or later, there’s going to be a head-on collision!

Marriage invites couples to think in the **plural** rather than the singular. The two become one flesh. Or as T. S Eliott wrote about marriage: “*The new person: US!*” Husband and wife are called to put one another’s needs first.

Marriage is the art of constant **compromise**. One definition states: “*Marriage is when you agree to spend the rest of your life sleeping in a room that is too warm next to someone who is sleeping in a room that is too cold!*”

Oftentimes something will be important to your spouse that is not important to you. However, here is a key principle to relationships: What is important to the person who is important to you must become important for you.

In the **church survey** on marriage a while back, members were asked what advice they would give to newlyweds. Some of the responses were humorous and others poignant, but the following words of advice all got at the heart of mutual submission.

Grooms were advised:

- Love your wife—not just the emotion but the verb. Love her and make certain she feels loved. You will be amazed when she does the same in return.
- Do unto your wife as you would have her do unto you.
- Learn and use phrases like “Yes, dear” and “I’m sorry”

Advice for **brides** included:

- Life is not always 50/50. Sometimes it is 60/40 or 20/80.
- Get ready for some hard work. A marriage is only as good as what you put into it; like a good recipe, the ingredients count a lot.
- Most days are not perfect. Step back, adjust, and smile. Keep going.
- Always remember you really are one flesh—don’t do or say anything that makes your spouse look bad.

Another element of mutual submission is **courtesy**. I recognize this might sound trivial in a discussion about Christian marriage. However, I have observed that simple politeness is an ingredient often missing in troubled marriages.

"Familiarity breeds contempt." We are often guilty of taking our spouse for granted. The common courtesies of life are ignored. We frequently treat total strangers with more respect and politeness than our own husband or wife! As Aretha Franklin put it, we all need, deserve, and appreciate a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Lessons learned in kindergarten serve us well in marriage: say please, thank you, you're welcome, and I love you. Pick up after yourself. Clean the table. Take out the garbage. Hug someone when they're hurting.

To make the point even sharper, put down the commode seat, wipe out the bathroom sink, pick up your dirty socks, carry your plate to the sink, wipe your shoes, share the TV remote, save the last piece for someone else, etc.

Couples who practice the discipline of mutual submission discover that it is a self-reinforcing loop. When we do unto others as we would have them do unto us, then it inspires the same sort of response in the other person. As Paul puts it, we find ourselves attempting to *"outdo one another in love."*

IV. Communication

A third critical element in marriages that are *"built to last"* is **communication**. Actually, communication is the key to any healthy relationship. A lack of communication is at the root of many—if not most—marital issues.

In *Reader's Digest*, Eunice Sundberg wrote about attending a marriage seminar on communication with her husband, Wesley. The instructor said, "It is essential that husbands and wives know the things that are important to each other." Then he addressed the men, "Can you describe your wife's goals, her dreams? Do you know her favorite song, her favorite flower? Turn to your wife right now and name her favorite flower."

Wesley leaned over, touched Eunice's arm tenderly, and whispered, "Its *Pillsbury All Purpose Flour*, isn't it?"

Clear communication involves both speaking and listening. **Speak** to your spouse and let him or her know what's on your mind. Here is a critical, scientific truth: NO ONE CAN READ MINDS! If we have to guess what the other person is thinking, then misunderstanding soon occurs. But how often do we hear ourselves saying, "Well, you know what I wanted . . . you know what I meant . . . you know what I expected!"

Marriage is intended to be the most intimate relationship in life. Couples should talk with their spouse about their day, goals, dreams, hurts, thoughts, and more. Husbands and wives also need to constantly reassure one another about their love.

Don't be like the couple who had been married for 50 years who went to marriage counseling. With tears in her eyes, the wife said, "He never tells me that he loves me!" The clueless husband responded, "I told her I loved her on our wedding day. If I ever change my mind, I'll let her know!"

The other half of communication is **listening**. It takes deliberate effort to really hear what another person says. Although both genders are guilty, men are especially adept at multitasking and selective hearing! But we are all quite capable of tuning out the frequency our spouse is broadcasting on! Active listening is hard work and includes skills such as echoing what the other says, asking questions, and expressing true interest in your spouse's thoughts and opinions. Howard and Charlotte Clinebell write about the art of “*deep listening*.” (p. 90)

Communication is assisted by spending **quality time** together in **quantity amounts**. We live in a hectic society with crazy schedules. Work, school, home, children, parents, and more all demand our attention. We end the day exhausted with little time or energy for our spouse. Time and energy are limited resources. So who are you going to cheat? How often at night do you find yourself in one room and your spouse in the other watching TV or surfing on-line?

Compare married life to dating. When we first started dating our future spouse, we *made* time to be together. Not an obligation but a delight to spend time in the other's presence. Although it sounds unromantic, we may need to deliberately schedule time with our spouse as deliberately as meetings, ball games, and other calendar items.

V. Romance

A fourth requirement for healthy marriages is **romance**. This occurs naturally when we are dating; but the romantic side of marriage can become neglected as the months and years pass. Emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy are all interrelated. You're never too old to start.

An elderly man and woman had been married for 50 years. One evening on the porch swing, the woman sighed and said, “Honey, do you recall when we were dating how you would put your arm around me?” He said, “Uh-huh.” She said, “Do that now.” A few moments later, the wife said, “And do you remember when we were dating how you would lean over and steal a kiss?” “Uh-huh.” “Do that now.” Then she said, “And do you remember how you used to nibble on my ear?” The man stomped into the house. Alarmed, the wife called, “Honey, where are you going?” And he answered, “If you want me to nibble on your ear, then I'm gonna need my teeth!”

In every age and stage of marriage, a healthy dose of romance provides the opportunity for couples to express their love in a tangible way. Intimate moments promote healing, wholeness, and closeness in a marriage.

VI. The Christian Faith

A foundational element for Christian marriages that are “*built to last*” is a shared **Christian faith**. In premarital counseling, I often ask a couple, “Why do you want to get married in the church?” Quite frankly, I am not overly concerned about the wedding coming off without a hitch. I am much more concerned about couples building a firm

foundation for the future. A lifelong Christian marriage is the uniting of two believers in a covenant before God and witnessed by the church.

United Methodist minister, Adam Hamilton wrote: "*Marriage is a call from God . . . choosing to marry is choosing to answer a calling from God to wed the person you are marrying.*" (p. 20) Howard and Charlotte Clinebell in their book, The Intimate Marriage, wrote: "*In the fullest sense of intimacy there is a vertical dimension . . . Intimacy on the horizontal, person-to-person plane and intimacy on the vertical or spiritual plane complement and reinforce each other.*" (p. 179-180)

Cathern Paxton wrote about the importance of God's place in marriage: "A **braid** appears to contain only two strands of hair. But it is impossible to create a braid with only two strands. Herein lies the mystery: What looks like two strands requires a third. The third strand, though not immediately evident, keeps the strand tightly woven." Paxton concluded, "In a Christian marriage, God's presence, like the third strand in a braid, holds husband and wife together." (*Leadership*)

Imagine a circle with God in the middle and each of us standing on the outer edge. When we come closer to God, we naturally come closer to one another.

Conclusion

When a man and woman say "*I do*" to one another, they've "*only just begun.*" Christian marriages that endure require love, submission, communication, romance, and faith. Couples who vow "*till death do us part*" must work diligently to make the relationship last. A regular maintenance plan is required for marriages that are "*built to last.*" Always remember that the real work and joy begin AFTER we say "*I do.*"