

When You Don't Know What to Do

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

4 of 6 in series "*Built to Last: Christian Marriages that Endure*"

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Introduction

Real life is NOT a **fairytale**. Our "*once upon a times*" do not always end "*happily ever after*." We all know the statistics. About 50% of all American marriages end in divorce. The odds of failure are much higher for teenage and multiple marriages. Even couples who stay together do not always enjoy healthy and joyful relationships.

EVERY married couple eventually reaches a time **when they don't know what to do**. Christian marriages that endure find ways to create a relationship that is "*built to last*."

I. Hard Times

Marriage is a long and **winding road** with milestones, crossroads, detours, potholes, and occasional dead ends. ALL marriages encounter difficult times. Couples who claim to never have problems will lie to you about other things as well!

The wedding vows recognize that couples will experience "*for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health*." Relationships go through various ages and stages of life. "*In all marriages, there are cycles of moving toward and moving away from one's spouse*." (The Intimate Marriage, Clinebells, p. 36) What we do during each season of marriage helps determine the future of the relationship.

Marriages that are "*built to last*" require an extraordinary investment of time, energy, and love. The key to lasting marriages is a **commitment** to one another in good times and bad. As we saw last week, this includes a mature understanding of love that is both FEELING and WILLING. When we don't feel loving or lovable, willing love sustains us.

Judy Viorst wrote: "*One advantage of marriage, it seems to me, is that when you fall out of love with him, or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until you maybe fall in love again*." Exactly! We act in love even when we don't feel in love. And by God's grace, husbands and wives act themselves back into the feelings of love.

II. Marriage in Crisis

In premarital counseling, I discuss "**pressure points**" in marriage. These are areas where most couples will eventually experience problems. "Pressure points" include families of origin, roles, communication, conflict, children, finances, expectations, religion, and more.

Unhealthy marriages cultivate **bad habits** that lead to escalating miscommunication and conflict. Three major issues are **disrespect, other affections, and unfair fighting**.

<h4>A. Disrespect</h4>

Unhealthy relationships cultivate an attitude of **disrespect**. Relationships between men and women tend to follow predictable patterns. When a couple first falls in love, each has an

idealized notion of who the other person is. Slowly they become acquainted with one another's strengths and weaknesses. Then reality hits after the wedding. Benjamin Franklin gave this advice to newlyweds: "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half shut afterwards!"

In marriage, familiarity *can* breed contempt. Spouses take for granted and even forget the positive characteristics that first attracted each to the other. Instead, they begin to focus on the negative aspects and annoying habits that we ALL possess.

On their wedding night, a young groom took his bride by the hand and gazed into her eyes. Then he said, "Now that we're married, dear, I hope that you won't mind if I mention a few little '**defects**' that I've noticed about you."

"Not at all," the bride replied with deceptive sweetness, "it was those 'little defects' that kept me from getting a better husband!"

Marriage is one of the most intimate relationships in life. It offers us a marvelous opportunity to enter into deep relationships that are greatly rewarding; but this very intimacy also reveals the defects in our spouse. In angry moments, we know exactly which buttons to push to cause the most harm. Critical words are remembered long after an incident has passed.

Such criticism is harmful in private, but it is extremely corrosive in **public**. One of the commandments of a healthy marriage is: "*Thou shalt not criticize thy spouse in public.*"

Mature love chooses to accept your spouse's flaws and focus on his or her admirable qualities. Healthy marriages build up and don't tear down, praise and don't criticize. We are called to the ministry of **edification**. In the New Testament, edifying others means to build up and encourage in the Christian faith. The final result is both individual maturity and corporate unity in Christ. As members of Christ's body, it is our duty and privilege to build up our spouse.

"Love builds up." (1 Cor. 8:1) "Let all things be done for edification." 1 Cor. 14:26
"Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thes. 5:11)

John Gottman is the author of several books on marriage. His research reveals that successful marriages contain significantly more positive than negative feelings, words, and experiences. The critical ratio is 5 to 1. For every negative conflict, there must be five plus affirmations of love and friendship. He writes: "*The key to reviving or 'divorce-proofing' a marriage is not (necessarily) in how you resolve conflict or disagreements but in 'how you are with each other when you're not fighting.'*" (Making Love Last a Lifetime, Hamilton, pp. 56-57)

B. Other Affections

A second bad habit of unhealthy marriages is **competing affections and temptations**. For the married Christian, our primary, earthly relationship is to our spouse. Marriage is an exclusive relationship. When we say "*I do*" to our spouse, we say "*I don't*" to everyone else. Proverbs 5: 18 says: "*May you rejoice in the wife (husband) of your youth.*"

Illicit affairs are a leading cause of divorce in our society. The seventh commandment warns: "*You shall not commit adultery.*" (Exodus 20: 14) Proverbs says that adultery is like putting a hot coal in your pocket—but folk always act surprised when they get burned. Adulterous thoughts and deeds betray our wedding vows and marital trust. Such affairs

ultimately hurt self, spouse, family, and others. I have NEVER talked to anyone in the aftermath of an adulterous affair that was glad that he or she had pursued it.

Anyone or anything that interferes with that relationship is a betrayal of trust. There are subtler ways the seventh commandment is broken. Some spouses have an affair with their TV, job, sport, hobby, exercise, gardening, home, drugs, alcohol, pornography, and the list goes on.

Technological advances are causing new challenges of fidelity in marriage. During the past decade, we have witnessed a hi-tech revolution that has transformed our lives. Computers and the Internet have opened up vast new horizons in our personal and professional worlds. Technology itself is value neutral—how technology is USED determines its worth.

Technology has a dark side that can negatively affect marriages. It's seductive and addictive. In its most innocent form, time spent surfing the web, emailing, texting, face-booking, and tweeting is time that we do not spend with spouse and children. Even when we are "with" our spouse physically, we may be miles away mentally while checking email, voice mail, and messages on our smart phones.

On a darker level, the Internet and satellite or cable television make **pornography** all too readily available. The number one "hit" on all search engines is "adult" sites—and I use "adult" in quotations because there's nothing adult about it. The most deviant material imaginable is only a mouse click or remote control button away. In conversations with other ministers, I believe this is an increasingly volatile problem that is destroying individual lives and marriages.

I might as well warn you that I am about to stop preaching and start meddling! I have concerns about the excessive time people spend on personal networks like *My Space*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. This is time that we could spend with our spouse; AND oftentimes people share things with others that they should be sharing with their spouse instead. The Internet provides an illusion of distance and safety that causes people to say intimate things that they would never repeat in person. Then one thing leads to another. You have heard me say repeatedly in the past that all seduction begins with flirtation; and it's a lot easier to flirt "safely" on-line.

There is growing anecdotal evidence that personal networks promote a setting where inappropriate relationships flourish and grow. It begins innocently enough as folk catch up with people from the past or friends in the present; but it can grow into something else. In the past decade, we have added a new phrase to our lexicon: "*emotional affairs*" that typically begin on-line. Emotional intimacy easily leads to physical intimacy.

Here's my personal advice. Monitor and limit the time you spend on-line and with other technology. Also carefully scrutinize what you say. A good guideline is to ask yourself, "Would I say this if my spouse were present?" I personally believe that couples should be transparent in their use of cell phones, computers, and the Internets. In fact, I believe each spouse should have access to any account their spouse uses, complete with passwords. These guidelines guard against the temptation of ignoring "No Trespassing" signs and straying into forbidden territory.

C. Unfair Fighting

A third bad habit of unhealthy marriages is unfair fighting. EVERY marriage has conflict. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Marriage is the union of two competing wills into one person. It is romantic, beautiful, and peaceful AND contentious, struggling, and combative!

Mike Mason rewrote Proverbs 27:17 to say: "*As iron sharpens iron, spouses sharpen one another.*" Sparks fly, heat occurs, and friction builds; but the result is the sharpening of each soul. The finished product is useful and polished--far superior to the original material. So in marriage our struggles and conflicts *can* actually make us better both as individuals and a couple.

We all have different **styles of fighting** that are normally learned from our parents. Then each couple develops its own style. Most couples have what I call a "**badger**" and a "**turtle.**" Badgers want to deal with conflict immediately. Turtles withdraw in the face of conflict. The problem is that each drives the other crazy! What badgers need is the assurance that the issue will be addressed. What turtles need is time to mull over the situation before responding.

Different styles are not necessarily good or bad; but they can be healthy and unhealthy. Even a violent sport such as **boxing** has rules. You cannot head butt, kick, trip, push, or bite. Hitting below the belt is prohibited. **Fair fighting** in marriage also has rules, including:

1) **No physical fighting**

There is absolutely no place for physical abuse and mistreatment in a loving relationship. Hitting, slapping, pushing, and grabbing break the rules. This is one area in marital counseling when I will immediately advise a spouse to get out of a relationship unless drastic change occurs.

2) **Use "I" statements rather than "You" statements**

"I" describe how I feel and see the situation. "You" statements are often attacks on the other person. Different dynamic to say: "I feel this way when you do that." Versus: "You make me feel this way when you do that."

3) **Address the behavior and not the person**

If you have a problem with what your spouse does, address the behavior and not the person. Extreme example would be difference between saying: "I think what you did was unwise." Versus: "You are incredibly stupid!"

4) **Bury the past, deal with the present**

Randy Travis sang a song about "*digging up bones.*" You cannot solve present problems if both people are going to dig up the past. Past is dead--leave it alone.

5) **Recognize that a lot of what we fight about is not worth fighting about.**

Most of what we fight about isn't worth fighting about. Ecclesiastes 7: 21-22: "*Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you--for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others!*" Let it slide!

III. Resolution

Making Christian marriages last means we must rid ourselves of bad relational habits. During crisis moments in marriage, both partners must work diligently to heal the hurt. If couples do not learn how to address these issues, then they cannot break out of a negative cycle and downward spiral. Although philosophies of marriage counseling vary, most counselors use the same, common approach. The process includes:

1) **Identify the problem**

First, identify the problem. Recognize the difference between "presenting problems" and underlying problems. The Clinebells state that "*troubled marriages are essentially hungry*

marriages." (p. 68) An important need is not being met, and one or both spouses hunger for something more.

2) **Claim responsibility**

The next step is to claim responsibility in the situation. Our sinful tendency is to engage in blaming behavior. When something goes wrong, it is not MY fault! We are like the child sent to the principal's office for fighting. The boy said, "Well, it all started when he hit me back!" Communication shuts down when blaming begins. Discussion is impossible while pointing fingers. Each person must claim their share of the responsibility.

3) **Communication**

Communication is critical. In counseling, sessions typically begin with each individual addressing the counselor. The goal is to have the couple talking to one another.

4) **Seek Help**

Trained counselors can help us deal with emotions and issues. Oftentimes a third party provides a perspective on the problem. The clergy at the church maintain a list of counselors in the area. We also have a trained pastoral counselor who is on site each week at the church.

5) **Prayer**

First session ask couple to spend next week praying FOR one another five minutes each day. Begin second session by asking them to share what they prayed. Found it to be healing for all involved. Then move to praying WITH each other.

6) **Claim the healing power of the Holy Spirit.**

Those of a certain generation will remember the 1970 movie *Love Story*. In one memorable scene Ali McGraw says to Ryan O'Neal: "*Love means never having to say you're sorry.*" Pttttthhhhhh! Six magic words to that help a marriage endure are "**I am sorry**" and "**I forgive you.**" Healthy marriages use these phrases liberally.

2 Corinthians 5: 18 describes our "*ministry of reconciliation.*" Nowhere is this spirit more necessary than in marriage. A song in our hymnal is entitled "*When Love is Found*" (643). The fourth stanza says: "*When love is torn and trust betrayed, pray strength to love, till torments fade, till lovers keep no score of wrong, but hear through pain love's Easter Song.*"

IV. Divorce

I believe in the healing power of God's grace. When both husband and wife are willing to put forth the necessary effort, miracles of restoration and reconciliation can occur.

There are moments, however, when marriages are strained beyond the breaking point. One or both partners are unwilling or unable to do the work required to make a relationship last. Sometimes marriages grow sick unto death. The church lives with a tension of promoting the sacred commitment of marriage but also recognizing that sometimes the least, worst thing that can happen is for a union to be dissolved.

Georgia has a "*No Fault Divorce*" statute, but this is an oxymoron. There is always enough blame to go around. "*Irreconcilable differences*" is a euphemism used in legal proceedings; but the phrase cannot communicate the broken relationships and heartaches that accompany it.

And at these moments we need to hear and proclaim God's Word of grace, forgiveness, and love. Back in the 1960s, John Claypool wrote about the church's neglect of the divorced by

saying: “*The church is the only army that shoots its wounded.*” I pray to God that we have learned a lot in the past decades. Within the Christian community, we are called to care for those who are hurting. We also declare that we serve a God of fresh starts and new beginnings. Our Lord forgives and grants us the grace to forgive and then move on.

Conclusion

Life is not a **fairytale** that occurs “*once upon a time.*” And “*happily ever after*” is not an automatic guarantee. Every marriage encounters difficulties and troubles; and there are moments when we don’t know what to do.

Christian marriages that endure must eliminate bad habits and establish healthy routines. Time and again couples find themselves saying, “I am sorry” and “I forgive you.” In this ministry of reconciliation, they also discover God’s grace to endure and overcome. It’s a long and winding road, but with the Lord’s help, we can travel it together.