

STRENGTHENING YOUR MARRIAGE



JACKSON STREET CHURCH OF CHRIST
1856 Jackson Street
Alexandria, Louisiana 71301

Benny B. Bristow

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Introduction:

Marriage is among the most exciting words in the English language because it is a concept from God. When God brought Adam and Eve together at creation, marriage began. This first marriage solved the problem of loneliness, and it can do the same today. Have you observed that when a husband or wife loses their mate in death, the first thing they mention is loneliness? Yes, one might speak of experiences of unhappiness caused by marriage, but it is a proven fact that if a couple follows God's original design for marriage, much happiness will be found.

Today in this address, our aim is to help us all strengthen our marriages by looking within self. When there are weaknesses and problems in our marriages, who do we blame? With few exceptions, don't we point our finger at our mates? However, this may or may not be the truth! If we really wish to strengthen our marriages, we will look within to make sure that we are not causing the problems.

While Jesus was eating the Passover with His apostles, He made a startling announcement. **"Assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me" (Matthew 26:21)**. Only Judas knew to whom Jesus was referring, but the others still began looking within their own hearts, and asked Him, **"Lord, is it I?" (v. 22)**. This process of looking within one's own heart is called *"introspection!"* When we have a weak marriage, we need to look from within and ask, "Is it I? Am I the problem?"

Let us in this message encourage all to practice introspection, and ask (as the apostles), "Lord, is it I?"

IS IT I WHO CANNOT COMMUNICATE?

Even though most husbands and wives spend many hours in conversation, millions are unable to communicate. They talk about the weather, the problems of others, financial difficulties, world affairs, and hobbies, but never get around to talking about how to improve their marriage and happiness. Why does communication often break down? Well, there are many reasons, but often we as individual husbands or wives may be the problem! Thus, we need to look within and ask, "Is it I who cannot communicate?"

As we look within to determine whether or not we are hindering communication, we need to look for specific roadblocks and then work to remove them. To find these roadblocks, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- **Am I a good listener?**

Successful communication in marriage is a two-way street, because love has two arms—one that reaches from us, and one that reaches to us! It is important to talk, but it is likewise just as important to listen. Jesus stressed this in His teaching: **"Then He called the multitude and said to them, 'Hear and understand'"**(Matthew 15:10). Have you ever been guilty of ignoring what your mate was saying because you were thinking about what you would say next? Have you ever felt that ONLY what you had to say (in the conversation) was of great importance? If you must answer "yes" to these questions, be assured that you have found in your life a roadblock that is blocking communication.

• **Am I Self-centered?**

From our earliest existence in life, we are tempted to be selfish, and one of the major assignments of parents is to teach their children to share. However, many fail and their children grow up continuing to be self-centered. When they marry, (with this selfish attitude) there is no way for them to properly communicate with their mates. All conversations in their marriages will involve only what they want and what is best for them. This will block all gates of communication, and in most cases both husbands and wives will live together in two different worlds (if they live together at all!)

Just as we cannot properly follow Jesus without denying self (**Mark 8:34**), neither can we communicate with our mates when self-centeredness is present.

• **Am I concerned about my mate's happiness?**

You will notice that the question is not, "Am I concerned about MY happiness," but rather, "Am I concerned about MY MATE'S happiness." Most people get married because they want to find happiness, and this is as it should be. However, failure comes when we do not recognize that for us to find happiness in marriage, we must work to make our mates happy. How can we be one with our mates if we are divided in seeking happiness? Paul teaches that husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He then continues, "**he who loves his wife loves himself**" (**Ephesians 5:28**). When Paul analyzed love, among other things, he said, "**love does not seek its own**" (**1 Corinthians 13:5**). When this kind of love is present, one is sincerely concerned about his or her mate's happiness.

• Am I preoccupied?

Please notice further that many fail to communicate because they are preoccupied when talking with their mates. Our lives can be filled with so many other things that we do not take time to work at our marriages. Therefore, when we are forced to talk, we may have our minds on other things, and this will produce instant failure in communication. Divided attention sets up a wall that is impossible to penetrate. This is a road block that must be removed if there is to be success.

As you searched within your hearts to determine if these four roadblocks are present, what did you find? Have you been blocking communication in your marriage? If you find one or more of these, please make an effort to remove them, and be assured that the lines of communication will be improved.

IS IT I WHO IS SELFISH?

If God were making another set of ten commandments (carved out in stones) for happy marriages, surely one of them would be, "Thou shall NOT be selfish." One of the magical and mysterious beauties of marriage is the concept of two people becoming one. As Jesus expressed it, **"They are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate"** (Matthew 19:6). The fastest way for a husband or wife to reverse this oneness is to be selfish.

Probably most of you have heard the saying, *"Marriage is a fifty-fifty proposition."* This may sound great, but it is false. Marriage must be a one hundred percent proposition on the part of each involved if there is to be happiness. When a husband gives all to being a good companion, and his wife does the same, selfishness

disappears. Consequently, each will strive NOT to deprive the other, and each will strive NOT to make unreasonable demands. The spiritual plan from the Lord that calls upon the wife to submit to her own husband, also commands the husband to love his wife as himself (**Ephesians 5:33**). This is a plan or way of life that will bring genuine happiness.

Is your marriage a one-sided marriage? Do you consider yourself the *giver* or the *taker*? Are you guilty of wife abuse or husband abuse because of selfishness? What is the antidote for selfishness? In one word, LOVE! If you want to see selfishness dissolve before your eyes, sit down and read only four verses from the pen of the apostle Paul. **“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)**. Show me a married couple with this kind of love, and I’ll show you a marriage without selfishness.

IS IT I WHO NEGLECTS MY MATE?

Neglect is a destructive word in all aspects of life, but it is even more damaging in marriage. Therefore, honestly look into your heart and ask, “Is it I who neglects my mate?” To help us all answer this question, may we consider some major ways to neglect.

- **One may neglect by failing to give proper attention.**

When the marriage is new, that beautiful bride or handsome groom is the center of attention. Each one is

made to feel that the other is very important, and this is shown daily. There are plenty of hugs and kisses, expressions of love and appreciation, and unexpected gifts. However, as you may have already anticipated, the time usually comes when the honeymoon is really over. Someone has said, *"You know the honeymoon is over when your dog brings you your slippers and the wife barks at you."* Be assured that the wife also has her way of knowing! As humorous as this may be, we all know that it is also true. Far too often the time comes when we are tempted to pay LESS attention to our mates.

• One may neglect by too much involvement in other things.

In our modern society, there are so many things vying for our time, and if we are not careful, too many of these things will cause us to neglect our mates. By the time we finish our involvement with work, children, sports, recreation, hobbies, television, and church activities, there may not be much time left for our husband or wife. Even good and wholesome activities can overload us to the point of destroying our marriages. This does not please the Lord.

Certainly it would be selfish for a husband or wife to seek all the attention of one's mate. However, it is not wrong to need and desire prime time with the one we love as ourselves! It is not uncommon to hear a wife complain that during football or hunting season she hardly knows that she has a husband. The wife may also be so involved that she forgets that she has a husband. Even without planning, this may happen occasionally, but when it becomes a way of life, a great strain is placed on marriages. Thousands of couples awaken to this truth after it is too late.

We often think of excessive drinking and alcoholics as destroying marriages, and this is certainly true. However, there are all kinds of "holics" that will destroy happiness in marriage. Since working and earning money for a family is considered an honorable thing, there are those who feel that they can become workaholics to the point of destroying their marriages without being guilty. They are wrong! The Lord wants us to work for our families, and to serve as Christians in His church, but never to the point of destroying our marriages. He wants all of these essentials of life to harmonize together to bring happiness in this life as well as hope for eternity. Therefore, we must avoid neglect through too much involvement.

• **One may neglect by failing to recognize his or her needs.**

Over the years, marriage has been defined in many different ways, but one purpose of marriage is to meet many of our important needs in life. In fact, when God originally designed the concept of marriage by making woman for man, it was to fulfill a specific need. God did not want Adam to be alone. **"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him' (Genesis 1:18).** To meet this need, woman was made and brought to Adam. She fulfilled the purpose that God intended, and Adam felt immediate oneness with her. **"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man" (Genesis 2:23).**

It is very important that we all recognize the fact that husbands and wives are different other than physical characteristics, and each has different needs. Failing to recognize this has destroyed more marriages than we can imagine. In fact, so much sexual incompatibility is

present because this fact is not recognized. Therefore, the husband should strive daily to learn the needs of his wife and how to fulfill them, and the wife should do the same in regard to her husband.

To illustrate, some men believe that women respond sexually in the same way as men, and that other than their anatomy there is no difference, but this is very incorrect. Dr. James Dobbs writes: *"males and females differ biochemically, anatomically, and emotionally. In truth, they are unique in every cell of their bodies, for men carry a different chromosomal pattern than women."* Thus the wife has a special need for emotional love before her intimate needs can be fulfilled, while the husband may place more emphasis on the visual and physical experiences. After the husband recognizes this fact about his wife, he should train himself to meet her needs. Likewise, the wife should understand the way God made him, and seek to submit accordingly. The ideal situation is present when love motivates both husband and wife to seek the good of the other.

Therefore, with this concept in mind, we should be able to understand what Paul was teaching the church at Corinth concerning the husband/wife relationship. **"Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).**

Only the Lord knows-how many marriages have

failed, or how many couples are staying together in unhappiness because husbands, wives, or both, have not sought to meet each other's needs in all aspects of life. Be assured that when God's pattern for marriage is violated, marriages will not find the happiness that God intended.

IS IT I WHO CAN'T SEE PERSONAL FAULTS?

Most of us have heard the wise saying, "*There are two sides to every coin,*" and this fully applies to problems in marriage. Even though the marriage relationship is to be one flesh, there are two personalities involved. Therefore, when problems arise, it is so easy to see the faults of our mate and to overlook our own. Many who are involved in marriage counseling (professionally and otherwise) are often called upon to hear one side of a problem. Almost without exception, the one doing the talking is pointing out the faults of their mate as they minimize their own. Assuming that their mate has more faults, this does not make the other person innocent! In far too many cases the so-called innocent one has brought out weaknesses in their mate, and therefore, both are wrong.

One day a young lady came to my office with plans to re-marry, and she made it clear that she had divorced her husband because of adultery. In further conversation, she related how it happened. For more than a month she purposefully deprived him sexually with the hope that he would commit adultery. In her words, "He finally did it, and now I'm free!" No, she was not innocent or free of guilt. Yes, her husband was wrong and sinful in what he did, but so was she! She could see plainly his sin, but was blind to her own.

Many of our marital problems may not go this far, but the principle is still the same. It becomes so difficult

to see our own failures, because generally we major on our mate's weaknesses, and minor on our own. It is at this point, that many marriages weaken or crumble. Thus, as we look within our hearts, let us ask, "Is it I who can't see personal faults?" For even though our mates have their faults, this does not nullify our own!

Conclusion:

Hopefully this message has challenged you to look within and ask, "Is it I who has betrayed my mate, and the vows we made together?" Someone might say, "It is too late now for me to change, I am fully set in my ways after these many years, and changing would be difficult." You are right in saying that changing is difficult, but so are unhappy marriages difficult! Although change is never easy, it can be done, and as Christians we must live a disciplined life surrendered fully to Jesus. Why not let today be the turning point in your life as you make changes to improve those things you found wrong?

When Judas looked within and saw betrayal, he made no efforts to change. Even after he betrayed Jesus, he went out and took his own life. Don't allow one defeat to bring about another. All of us can turn things around if we are willing to see the problems, and then work to correct them. The world says, "Break up, get a divorce, and marry another." However, this is not God's way. **"Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6)**. Also, the same weaknesses will be carried to the next marriage. Therefore, look within, correct all weaknesses, work together in love, and you will be able to daily strengthen your marriage!

Although marriage involves many weighty responsibilities, it is a gem in the crown of life.