

Vital relationships: Building a vital marriage

Sermon for Sunday, February 25, 2007
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12; 19:5-6; Proverbs 5:18-19

1) You don't need to be married; you need God

The movie *Jerry McGuire* has a big scene where Tom Cruise says to Rene Zellweger, the woman he is romancing, "You complete me." That's a great line, great for a Hollywood romantic drama. But it's terrible theology. Nowhere does the Bible say anything about people needing to be married in order to be whole.

That's one of the big myths of our society: "I must be married to be happy." That's simply not true. God blesses singleness just as much as marriage. You can be happy and fulfilled in life either single or married. In fact, the apostle Paul has an entire chapter in the Bible on this very topic: 1 Corinthians 7. That would be a good passage to read if you're wondering about this.

Our daughter Christine pointed out that the theme I chose for this sermon series—"Vital relationships"—creates a problem for today's message: it suggests that marriage is vital, and that if you're not married, you're missing something vital. So I'm trying to do some damage control here, to explain that *isn't* what I meant. It just goes to show you that you shouldn't trust your preacher. I've said it before and I'll say it again: whatever I say, take it with a grain of salt. Compare it with what God teaches us in the Bible.

We live in an age where every message you are sent is telling you that you can have a better life if you would just buy more stuff. If you just bought the right kind of underarm deodorant then you could be like that sports legend, and if you drive the right SUV you can be like that perfect family on their perfect vacation. Every day that goes by we hear message after message telling us that if only we had more stuff, we would be happy.

Well, marriage is in that same category. Friends, I'll warn you: if you are thinking about getting married, or you're already married, and you believe that your spouse is responsible for your happiness, you are in for a sad surprise.

Near the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the key to happiness. It's in chapter 5, and that part of his message is called the Beatitudes—or, as Robert Schuller puts it, the "Be-Happy Attitudes." The basic key to being happy is to put God at the centre of your life, to surrender control over to God. Anytime we expect something else or someone else to provide our

happiness, we are actually putting that person or thing in the place of God.

Having said that, *if* you are married or plan to be married, there are some principles the Bible teaches about...

2) Commitment builds a strong marriage

In other words, if you've chosen to be in a marriage relationship, then aim for your marriage to be vital. The word "vital" comes from the Latin word for "life." Things that are vital support and sustain life; the opposite would be things that drain and destroy life. Make sure that you are in a marriage which is life giving! The only way to do that is to make sure that *you* are a life-giving person. Remember last week's sermon on "Would you want you for a friend"? Everything I said there, about being faithful, genuine, helpful and close applies to marriage.

Here's a negative example of what I mean. Craig Barnes tells about a conversation he had.

A man told me he had been dating a woman for several years, and she was starting to wonder if they would ever marry. He told me he didn't know if he could marry her because, as he said to me, "I don't think she makes me happy."

I asked him why not, which was a mistake. He went on and on explaining all the reasons why she didn't make him happy.

Finally I interrupted and asked, "What kind of wife would make you happy?" The more he described what he was looking for in a wife, the more convinced I became that what he really needed was not a wife. He needed a goldfish, the pretty kind with the long tail that floats around, or maybe a Golden Retriever—but even a dog will make demands on you emotionally. A goldfish, though, just sits there and looks pretty and doesn't ask you to communicate. It doesn't ask you how your day was or expect you to listen to how its day was. The last thing he needed was a wife, because his whole understanding of why the world existed was to meet his needs.

a) Your commitment is a covenant with God

Sometimes someone will say to me, "I don't feel any love any more. Our marriage is over." The problem here is allowing the marriage to be driven by feelings.

The truth is, you will not always feel in love. At times you will feel disappointed. At times you will feel angry. And at times you will feel nothing. So if a marriage is

based on feelings, it will fall apart when difficulties arise.

A vital marriage is built on commitment. You make a promise to stay together “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow... as long as we both shall live.” That isn’t just marriage *contract*. It’s a *covenant*. A contract is a legal document. It has the power of the legal system behind it. A covenant, on the other hand, is an agreement with God. It has the power of God behind it.

Marriage is a unique relationship in the Bible; there is nothing else like it. Two people commit themselves to one another for life, and God is part of the relationship. Listen to how Jesus described marriage.

Matthew 19:5-6, New Living Translation:

“... a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together.”

When difficulties arise, instead of just collapsing, they can call upon God for help in restoring the relationship.

b) Start with commitment

Ever since the “sexual revolution” of the 60s, more and more couples have been moving in together. Common sense tells us that this is a good idea: it will be like a trial marriage before they make the big step to a formal marriage. If they are incompatible, better to find that out before making the big step. At least that’s the conventional wisdom.

Here’s something you might not have known. Studies have found that couples who lived together before marriage are much more likely to divorce as couples who did not.

- *The American Sociological Review* published a study from Yale University researches which found that cohabiting women were 80% more likely to separate or divorce than were women who had not lived with their spouses before marriage.
- In the USA, the National Survey of Families and Households indicates that “unions begun by cohabitation are almost twice as likely to dissolve within 10 years compared to all first marriages: 57% to 30%.”
- *The Journal of Marriage and the Family* published the results of a study by University of Western Ontario of 8,000 people, which found similar results for Canada.

Other studies also found that couples who live together before marriage:

- are less happy with their marriage
- have more trouble communicating
- sex is not as satisfying
- feel less secure in their relationship

The general conclusion of these studies: when couples live together before marriage, the attitude that “If it doesn’t work we can just split up” is carried over into the marriage. It is more a marriage of convenience instead of a marriage of commitment.

Commitment is the key, not just to a long marriage, but also to a happy and healthy marriage. Commitment enables couples to overcome their problems. Billy Graham was once asked the secret of his long marriage with his wife Ruth. He replied, “Ruth and I have been happily incompatible for 58 years.”

c) Commit to stay faithful to each other

The marriage vow “to be faithful to you alone” is a wonderful promise of security. It means the couple find their sexual satisfaction in each other, and there is no need to look to others.

Proverbs 5:18-19, New Living Translation:

**Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you.
Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe,
a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always.
May you always be captivated by her love.**

About ten years ago basketball star Magic Johnson made headlines with his claim about the thousands of women with whom he had had sex. I forget the person’s name, but I remember what another player said in an interview, “I get just as much sex as Magic. The only difference is that I do it all with one woman.”

Love, commitment, faithfulness, challenge, learning to sacrifice... all in all, I’d say marriage is an excellent way God has chosen to help people grow in character and become more like Jesus.