

Nourishing Living Relationships

#5 Principle: *A marriage not probably nourished is a living entity that beings to lose strength and die.*

A marriage is not just a contract signed by two people. It is not an arrangement. A marriage is not the result of one moment when two make promises to each other in front of a crowd, tempts to "fix" each other. Marriage, in the true sense, is a living entity, and sometimes and sometimes living entities begin to lose strength because they have not been properly nourished. Couples decide they need marriage counseling for a variety of reasons. Through counseling, the individuals in marriage gain different insights into the marital problems. But one thing remains constant: *The marriage can be revived.* Nevertheless, some people leave relationships because they sense it is the only way to can survive. Most are exhausted with inadequate self-efforts to "fix" the marriage.

WHEN A SPOUSE LEAVES

Some people decide to leave a marriage. For some the "leaving" amounts to emotional abandonment, while others actually pack their bags and walk out. The fact of the matter is a person can walk out on a marriage and never find what they were looking for in that relationship. We Christians condemn divorce, but the purpose of this lessons is to see at what happens inwardly before and after divorce occurs.

The "Heart" of a Divorce

Imagine that a day finally comes when you have tried everything and trying hard has failed. Your efforts to deny the problem no longer mask the gulf that exists between you and your mate. Both you and your spouse feel totally exhausted in unsuccessful attempts to "fix" each other. You decide to separate. When this happens, the relationship is only being made to appear as broken and unhealthy as it has been in reality. The fact is, somewhere along the way the relationship died, and it needs reviving. The shock that comes with the announcement goes like this:

"How could this have happened? He was in the ministry!"
 "Wasn't she the head of her church's women's ministry?"
 "Didn't he talk at one time about going to the mission field?"
 "I can't remember a time when they weren't together."

The responses document the fact that too often it is more important for a Christian couple to appear as if they have a healthy marriage than to actually have one-which requires disagreement, work, and real one-flesh unity in which both parties grow healthier. **"IF WE DON'T FILE, GOD WON'T KNOW"** God hates divorce and the damage it causes. But He hates every bit as much the shaming, broken-down marriages that masquerade as Christian marriages because of the spiritual damage they cause in the life of one or both partners, not to mention the children. Christians often are guilty of two phenomena\:

1. First, many Christians think that God likes curse-full marriages better than divorce: In other words, a hurtful, unhealthy marriage is more pleasing to God than a divorce.
2. Second, many of them also think that as long as they don't get a piece of paper certifying their broken relationship, God can't tell that it's broken. Too many people remain in unhealthy marriages that have none of what God says is important in marriage.

Yet the reason they don't get divorced is because the Bible is against it. And they say, "We just want to do what would be pleasing to God." So they remain in a disconnected, hurtful marriage for six months, a year, ten years- maybe even fifty years. Then they pat themselves on the back for caring about what God says about marriage, when there is no evidence in their marriage of what God truly wants.

This is a disturbing statement, I know-but for too many Christians, being married has come to mean not being divorced. They think that as long as they have a piece of paper that says their marriage is intact, God won't notice that it's broken. It is as though God cares about the letter of the law so much that He isn't able to notice the true spirit of a marriage.

Miserable marriages and divorce are both wrong; both are unhealthy alternatives. It seems that many Christians are willing to settle for a sickly imitation of the real thing. Is a lousy marriage better than divorce? I believe God grieves over both.

SIMULTANEOUSLY STAYING AND LEAVING

There is a dilemma for those people who prefer curse-full marriages to divorce, and who are trying to impress God by adhering to the letter of the law. Since they need to outwardly perform in accordance with the written Word in order to keep their sense of God's approval, they must find a way to stay in the relationship. But when the relationship has become painful, a constant indictment against them, a reminder of shame, and a drain on their energy, they look for a way to leave. Choosing to stay and leave is perhaps the most tiring alternative of all. Let me explain.

Lee realizes she is incapable of changing Jerry, that he will never live up to her expectations. Lee also realizes she is incapable of changing herself enough to live up to Jerry's loudly voiced expectations of her. *The relationship has become one of constant reminders of emptiness, inadequacy, and shame.* Because they are Christians, Lee and Jerry are determined never to divorce. Lee is also a business consultant. She is highly respected in the workplace, in constant demand, and is paid a great deal of money for her time. Lee is constantly affirmed by her clients, and is rewarded with checks and bonuses-tangible reminders that she is capable and competent. At home, however, she is constantly reminded how inadequate and incompetent she is as a spouse. ***Frankly, it is simply easier and less painful for a person to spend eight to ten hours every weekday in an environment where he/she is being affirmed.*** Then the relationship becomes one where one party looks outside the relationship for fulfillment. The marriage has broken down. Lee's choice to give up on her former source of value, which was Jerry's performance. Now she is drawing her sense of worth from her work.

ACCEPTABLE FORMS OF ADULTERY

In truth, Lee is being adulterous in her relationship with Jerry. She is doing this through a relationship with work that amounts to a socially acceptable form of marital unfaithfulness. Let me hasten to clarify: Every woman who works is not committing "spiritual adultery" or robbing her husband and family. Men can be just as prone, and perhaps more prone, to vanish into their work as a means of avoiding problems at home and getting the ego-affirmation that is only a false substitute for having real life and worth as a result of Christ within. It's "the American Way."

There are many ways in which people commit marital unfaithfulness that is not in the form of sexual adultery. Some people vanish into TV watching or Internet surfing: For some people it is a much less painful alternative than trying to have a relationship in which you never feel good enough. Some people

vanish into making money :For them, having a big bank account serves as tangible (and false) evidence of their personal value, and it salves the pain of a not-good enough marriage and when their marriage one day collapses, they are totally surprised. They've been so busy, they've not seen the sings.

THE STORY OF MIKE AND DORA

Mike grew up in a rural area of upper Michigan. Through his childhood, several lessons were deeply ingrained in him by his father. One was a love for hunting and fishing, and many other activities that had to do with the outdoors. In the fall, almost every day after school, Mike went hunting alone or with his dad. In the spring it was fishing Experiences in the outdoors provided refreshment, and even a perspective on God's creative genius. Yes, there were many healthy and positive aspects to all this outdoor activity, but it was also one of the ways Mike's dad avoided facing the stressful aspects of his life. Subtly, it was communicated to Mike: When the going gets tough, men go fishing. Another lesson imparted to Mike was that it was his job to make sure everyone else was happy. His father contributed to this with outbursts of anger for which he never took responsibility. It was then Mike's job, or the job of another family member, to prevent the rage, and it was their fault. On the surface, Dora's family situation looked much more caring than Mike's, and it was not nearly as volatile. Nevertheless, she grew up with a father who communicated that he was not all that interested in her. Not that he stated his disinterest-but by remaining passive and uninvolved he neglected to communicate love and acceptance. For her part, Dora's mom acted as if men were more important than women, and made it her job to see that Dora's dad was content even if it meant that she self didn't have a life. Dora learned to interpret absence as non-acceptance and leaving as abandonment. She also learned that what men thought or wanted was the most important thing. So in one form or another both Dora and Mike came into their marriage with a rule that said: "Good, valuable, acceptable, spiritual spouses meet all the needs of their spouse." Their relationship consisted of a lot of effort trying to live up to their own expectations as well as those of their partner. This was also true when it came to fishing. Consider the following dialogue, representative of what it sounded like when Mike wanted to go fishing, with (Jeff's) comments:

MIKE: I'm planning to go fishing next weekend.

DORA: Again? You're always going fishing. (This was not true.)

MIKE: That's not true! I hardly ever get to go fishing. (This was not true either.) Besides, I'm going with one of the kids from the junior-high youth group and his dad. (Who can argue?)

DORA: You'd rather be with them than with me.

MIKE: That's not true. I's just that I really like to go fishing.

Let's examine this scene a bit: Fishing did restorative things for Mike that Dora couldn't do and didn't have to do. But Dora believed that good Christian husbands and wives meet all the needs of their spouses. *Therefore, she interpreted Mike's love of fishing as a lack of love for her.* She also felt indicted as a wife because, after all, if she was being the kind of wife she was supposed to be, Mike wouldn't even want to go fishing; all his needs would be met at home. For his part, Mike felt guilty when he went fishing because he knew how sad Dora was. If he stayed home, he felt sad and angry because he really wanted to be out there in that rowboat. He also knew that Dora still wouldn't be satisfied and would want him to stay home the next time as well. And if Mike did choose to stay home, Dora felt guilty! There was no way for either of them to win. So Mike thought, If both of us are going to feel lousy either way, I might as well go fishing. Should one person in a relationship constantly be off fishing (or watching TV, or whatever else) instead of being with his/her spouse? Absolutely not. Should one person in a relationship

be upset any time his/her spouse pursues a pastime that is important to them? No. What I have described, however, is not simply an issue of fishing vs. staying home. It is not about the outward activities at all. It is about Dora placing expectations on Mike and on herself that neither of them can fill. Mike's method of handling the problem was to run. Dora's was to hold on more tightly. Neither would face the matter of wrong expectations. This kind of dynamic sucks the life out of any relationship. Wrong expectations showed themselves in other ways in this relationship. Dora sometimes felt sad and would try to tell Mike. Mike thought that a good Christian husband should always know how what to say to help his wife not be so sad. So he would launch into a big lecture in an attempt to fix Dora's sadness. Instead of feeling supported, she felt even more sad and controlled as well. When Mike realized his talk didn't work, he'd get frustrated. Upon seeing Mike's frustration, Dora would decide not to tell him when she was sad in order to control his frustration. Eventually, when Dora shared her sadness, Mike would not say anything. Wanting some kind of response, Dora would insinuate that "good husbands know what to do," and Mike would feel as though he couldn't win either way. No one felt affirmed. No one felt affirming. In fact, this downward spiral resulted in much tiredness for both of them.

AN UNACCEPTABLE FORM OF ADULTERY

Leaving a relationship could also take the form of an extramarital affair. If a man or woman chooses to have an affair, there are several things to take into account. First, no one gravitates toward an empty looking spouse substitute. Therefore, this new love interest will have to look full on the outside. "Full" simply means having characteristics and behaviors different than the spouse left behind. Second, a person who leaves is still under the illusion that people can fill people. They have simply chosen to exchange one false god, who has not been able to fill them, for another that promises to. If a Christian realizes they are on the brink of adultery and turns to a counselor for help, they too often receive counsel that they should simply try harder in their marriage. But if the inner, spiritual patterns of idolatry are not addressed, the couple is destined to clone those patterns in future relationships,

THE MOST ACCEPTABLE FORM OF ADULTERY

As we have seen, an affair is adultery in its most unacceptable form. And work-related absence from a spouse can become a type of adultery in a more acceptable form. But I have witnessed the sad effects of an even more acceptable form of marital unfaithfulness. This is when ministry involvement serves the purpose of keeping a couple from facing painful relationship issues. This is often very difficult to confront because a busy ministry can masquerade as holiness and commitment to God. Paul leads a Bible study where he receives constant affirmation for his insight and wisdom. He visits people in the hospital who are always grateful for the visit and who boast to others about his generous concern. Many in his church praise him for the selfless sacrifice of family time in service of others. Sherry, his wife, feels otherwise. But how can she object without feeling enormously guilty? God is pleased with Paul because he is so active in ministry, right? And it is easy for Paul to avoid Sherry's indicting comments at home for the positive compliments he receives while doing ministry. Those who confront this are often accused of being unspiritual or not caring about God. Countless wives of Bible college or seminary students find their way to counselors because they feel as if they are losing their marriage relationship as a result of the ministry or preparation for it. When they raise questions at home, they are put down by their husband, the professor, the pastor, or even the president of the college for "not caring about the kingdom." In truth, these women are often trying to confront a religiously acceptable form of adultery.

NEXT WEEK: CHILDREN AND RECYCLING THE CURSE