

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Help! We're Married: Help! We're Married!

Groucho Marx was once asked how long he had been married. He replied, "Forty years and it just seems like yesterday." Then he added, "And you know what a bad day yesterday was!"

We may not be married, or we may have been married a short time or, like Groucho Marx, a long time. Over the next four weeks we shall be looking at the subject of Christian marriage and how God intended this remarkable union between a man and a woman to be a lifelong joyful experience and demonstration of love not, in the words of Groucho, "a bad day".

We are going to look at Christian marriage under the titles:

- Help! We're married!
- Help! We've been invaded!
- Help! We're stretched!
- Help! What happens next?

Today's talk is Help! We're married!

To have a successful marriage we do need help and, as with every aspect of Christian living, this help is found in the Bible.

In Hebrews 13:4 we read, "*Marriage is honourable.*" This honour has never diminished in God's sight. The idea of honour conveys something which is precious and valuable. The love between a man and a woman expressed in all the varied circumstances of life is very precious. Its value is not limited to the personal enjoyment of the couple involved but extends to the well-being of both family and society.

To begin a Christian marriage we need to ask for God's guidance to be led to the right person with whom we will share our life. We cannot expect God's blessing on a relationship which is outside His will. For example, the common practice of living together before marriage is not a Christian way of life. It has been reported that more marriages fail when the partners have lived together before marriage than in marriages where this has not happened. Regardless of such reports, relationships upon which Christian marriages are formed must have complete integrity and be based upon faith towards God, with genuine love for and trust in each other. This love and trust does not wait for some distant and possible true commitment, but begins with a wholehearted expression of devotion.

In the creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:25) we see how God prepares Adam for marriage. It is interesting that God does not create Adam and Eve at the same time. Instead, God first creates Adam (Genesis 2:7) and a relationship is formed between God and man, intended for the enjoyment of fellowship. God then plants a garden in which he places Adam (Genesis 2:8-14), and the first man is given the first job - a gardener (Genesis 2:15). Adam becomes a gardener and has responsibility for the world he inhabits. It is only after these relationships are established that Eve is created (Genesis 2:20-21). A right relationship with God and the ability to take responsibility in practical ways equipped Adam for his marriage to Eve.

This is God's pattern - the relationships of husband and wife and, subsequently, as fathers, mothers, children. The members of the wider family become the building blocks of society.

Preparation for marriage is vital. It is very useful for couples to take advantage of the help and guidance that spiritual and experienced Christian married couples can give. Every Christian fellowship should have a genuine pastoral and prayerful care for those planning to marry. It is evident from the Bible that the early Christian church grew on the basis of God's salvation of whole families (see Acts 16:31-34), and the re-establishment of marriage and a lifelong one-man-one-woman relationship.

Christians should always approach marriage under God's direction. For example, God has told us quite clearly that Christians should not be "*unequally yoked together with unbelievers*" (2 Corinthians 6:14). In terms of marriage, this

means not marrying someone who is not a Christian. In the East, oxen were the most common animals that were yoked together. For this to work effectively animals had to be chosen which complemented each other. A bad yoke of oxen was when one pulled one way whilst the other resisted and wanted to go another way. It did not work. And it does not work in marriage. To go against the explicit commandment of God is to put one's Christian life in great difficulty. Love is a very powerful emotion and sometimes leads us to believe we know better than God. That is a great mistake, which has proved costly for many Christians who have entered into marriages with unbelievers. Of course, God, in His grace, is always able to overrule. But that should never be an excuse for disobedience.

I often found it helpful to think of marriage in terms of building a house. A house needs a good foundation. Marriage needs a solid foundation of love and commitment. If the foundation is not good, the building will fall down, and sadly, at present, we are seeing an increasing number of Christian marriages failing. This has a profound negative effect upon the Christian testimony, because if we cannot be reconciled to each other how can we speak to the world about the God of reconciliation?

A house is very expensive to build. Let's not fool ourselves about the significant costs involved in marriage. It involves giving all we have and are to another person.

The building process needs good communications. Communication is absolutely vital to a good marriage. Communication with God is central to this. "Those who pray together stay together", as the aphorism says. Also those who talk together walk together.

When a house is finished, you have to maintain it from then on; otherwise its shabbiness is evident, its value decreases and it decays. Divorce is painful but what is equally, and perhaps more painful, is the awful emptiness of an ongoing relationship where there is no love, respect or joy. Let us never take for granted a good marriage, and let us never forget God can transform a failing marriage into a happy one - *"I am the LORD who heals you"* (Exodus 15:26).

Christian marriage is a lifelong investment in which the giving of oneself is central. The Lord Jesus said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35) and this is especially true of marriage. These costs are threefold.

1. **Me.** The husband has to learn to give himself. *"Christ ... loved the Church and gave himself for her"* (Ephesians 5:25).
2. **Mine.** The husband has to learn to give what he has - **my** time, **my** possessions, **my** energy. *"Husbands, love your wives"* (Ephesians 5:25).
3. **Yours.** The husband has to learn to value another person and put that person first - *"how he may please his wife"* (1 Corinthians 7:33). But if this is costly, it is also rewarding, because the wife has to do the same. One flesh does not only mean a sexual union, but a total giving of one person to another - a fulfilment of the vows of marriage.

Building is a very complex process and this applies to marriage. Here, again, the secret is the communications system. I have already mentioned communicating with God through prayer - those who pray together stay together. Let's also look more closely at the thought that those who talk together walk together.

I have often spoken to young married couples about this subject in terms of a communication toolbox. In the toolbox are three things: explaining, listening and responding.

First we need to explain to each other the things which encourage us and the things which concern us. We also need to listen. Not only to listen to the words that are being said, but also to recognise the emotions, which are often hard to express. Listening is so beneficial. Think of the times when a friend simply listened to you. Afterwards, the circumstances had not changed, but you felt better simply because someone listened. God is the best listener there is. His ear is never closed to us and neither should ours be. We all know how disappointing it is when we share something important with a friend or colleague and we can see by their inattention that they are not listening or concerned about what is important to us.

We feel this disappointment because communication is not only about explaining and listening but also about responding. In marriage, God wants us to learn from Him in all the experiences we pass through as man and wife and respond to the needs we each have. This is the way we build up our relationship and how we better demonstrate God's love and power through our marriages. This is perhaps summed up in the words of Philippians 4:2, *"Be of the same mind."*

During the course of our marriages difficulties will come, accidents will happen and problems will emerge. To deal with these we need the wisdom which is from above (James 3:17). This comes from seeking God's mind and will - through prayer, the direction of His will and jointly reflecting on the circumstances we are in, and the way forward. The

confidential support of Christian friends and family is also a wonderful source of encouragement and help - but choose friends carefully.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us to watch and pray (Matthew 26:41; Mark 13:33, 14:38). Anticipating problems is an important feature of the Christian life. Sometimes problems come unexpectedly, like health issues. But many problems you can see coming and that is the time to start praying! Anticipate when you can, analyse problems with each other and in God's presence, and seek His answer. Never let problems divide you in marriage but allow them to bring you together. Always take action together and support each other even when you are not 100% convinced of the course you have decided to take. Faith is about trust when you are uncertain (see Hebrews 11:1). Commit your way to the Lord and trust Him to bring it to pass. Never bring recriminations but always share the weight of difficulties.

In the end, we create a valuable marriage. Marriage is worth it! It is God's pattern. Husband and wife, father, mother, children, the larger family - these are the components of communities. The value comes from two important investments: Husbands, "*love your wives*" (Ephesians 5:25); and wives should "*love their husbands*" (Titus 2:4).

Throughout the history of civilisation, women have been owned like property and abused. It is only when we come to Christianity that God's model is reaffirmed - a lifelong union between one man and one woman. Paul in outlining the qualifications of a bishop in 1 Timothy writes: "*This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)*" (1 Timothy 3:1-5).

Today the idea of marriage as a lifetime commitment of a man to a woman is thought of as being unrealistic and can be abandoned as a way of life. Yet, even when marriages fail, people still continue to look for the one ideal relationship and often remarry. The desire for this God-appointed relationship is still widespread and it is the spiritual responsibility of Christians to demonstrate its value.

Some Christians are already married when they trust Christ and still have husbands or wives who do not share the same faith. This can bring its own pressures and Christians in this situation need prayerful support and understanding. Christian witness in such marriages is very important and care should be taken so that Christian activities and family responsibilities do not come into conflict. A balanced approach needs to be taken. A few years ago in such a situation and through the patience, love and prayers of a wife, children and Christian friends a husband trusted Christ in his mid-eighties.

As we have seen, the basis of Christian marriage is knowing God and knowing each other. This gives us the resources to know how to work things out when trouble comes along. Today we live in a throwaway world. We no longer try very hard to repair things. If our television or washing machine breaks down, or our car becomes too unreliable, what do we do? We change them. In today's world, it is often less expensive to change an appliance than to replace a part because labour charges are so high. We talk constantly about consumers. Consumers use up things, and then get replacements. This is reflected in our relationships. Relationships often only survive whilst things are going well. When difficulties arise, relationships are abandoned.

The marriage of Aquila and Priscilla is described in the New Testament (Acts 18:2,18, 26 and Romans 16:3) and referred to in 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19. They lost their home and business and also became refugees. What enabled them to survive these pressures and for their marriage to remain so strong and be such a blessing to others? The resources they had came from the relationship they had with God and it brought strength to their relationship with each other. Trouble did not separate them but brought them nearer to God and to each other. When our marriages are affected by difficulties, how do we handle them? Do we bear them alone until they become unbearable? Do I as a husband fail to see the physical, emotional or spiritual struggles my wife has? Or do I personally take responsibility to understand and help her in such circumstances? Equally, a man needs the same response from his wife in times of stress and difficulty.

It is at times of difficulty that we can begin to think about giving up on our marriages and begin to amass reasons to escape from our marriage vows. Although crises can be blamed for marriage failure, usually unhappiness in a marriage builds up gradually. Crises are often the opportunities to allow the pressures of this unhappiness to explode. I drive up and down the country a great deal covering thousands of miles. One thing I do is ensure my car is regularly serviced. This keeps my car regularly maintained and in good condition and also highlights emerging faults. How often do I sit down with my wife to find out what's troubling her and what makes her happy? How do I surprise her to demonstrate my love? How often do I take some of the workload she finds too much? Christians' lives are demanding because of our commitments to our families, to our work and to the Lord's service are so great. There is the danger that we lose sight of our need to "*come aside ... and rest a while*" (Mark 6:31). This was the Lord's advice to His disciples in relation to service, but it is an equally valid principle in marriage.

The most common problems in marriage are communication, money and sexual relationships. I spoke about communication earlier. When people are in love they talk constantly to each other and want to spend all the time they can together. In marriage, the pressures of life and the demands on our time make this more difficult and love can cool. The challenge is to ensure this does not happen. We can make time for things we want to do - trivial things like watching TV and endless hours on the computer. We have to make time for each other and invest and sacrifice in making our spouse know how important they are to us and how much we love them. The Lord said to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2: *"You have left your first love"* (Revelation 2:4). They had not stopped loving, but the vibrant sacrificing love they once had was no longer there. And the Lord felt it. The needs we have in a marriage differ between men and women. That is why understanding those needs is important and communication to do this is vital. Take time to talk.

This love and its development is essential to a healthy marriage. At the outset of married life it is important that we effectively manage the many changes we will face from being single to becoming married couples. Interestingly in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 24:5 a newly married man was given freedoms so that he could devote himself to his wife and establish a happy marriage: *"When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken."* This was not only for personal happiness but the wellbeing of a new family and the stability of society. Unfortunately, our Government has not introduced any similar incentives today, but the principle of devoting time and energy to ensuring a strong foundation to our marriages is compelling.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 Paul writes, *"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."* In these verses Paul recognises our tripartite being. We are spirit, soul and body. We have spiritual needs, emotional needs and physical needs.

These needs can be summarised in eight characteristics of a good marriage:

1. **Spiritual communion.** We need to maintain personally and as a couple a right relationship with God.
2. **Love.** We need to share and express in all circumstances God's love towards each other, our children, our families, our fellowship and our fellow men.
3. **Prayer.** At the beginning of each day we need to set aside time to approach together the throne of grace to find the help we need (see Hebrews 4:16) to harmoniously express God's love, will and blessing in our lives.
4. **Faith.** We need to trust God in every aspect of our lives - not just the big issues, but everyday matters which often grow into bigger problems.
5. **Sharing.** We need to support each other in our different but complementary roles and responsibilities. We need to learn to weather the storms and crises of life in ways which defeat resentment and, instead, make us more like Christ.
6. **Communication.** We need to develop the skill to choose the right moments to explain, with openness and honesty, those things which trouble and concern us and those things which give us joy and stimulate thankfulness. We need to have the grace to listen to each other's voices, hearts and minds so that we understand and respond to each other.
7. **Giving.** We need to be able to give all we have and are in service and sacrifice. In the words of Paul: *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"* (Romans 12:1-2).
8. **Worship.** We need to respond in spirit, soul and body to who God is and what He has done, and to be able to see and live for His glory.

If you asked me how long I have been married, I would say, "Forty three years this month and it just seems like yesterday." And then I would add, "And you know what a wonderful day yesterday was!"

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