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Matthew 5:23-25; Ephesians 4:26-32; etc. “Resolving Marriage Problems”

Intro. Last Sunday I began my series of messages on the Christian home. I talked about the foundational principles of marriage. God created marriage to meet the need of companionship, to provide much needed help, and to provide the best environment to procreate & raise children. I also talked about the fact that there should be interdependence, unity, and intimacy in marriage. In God’s original design, He clearly intended for the husband to be the head of the home, and marriage should last for a lifetime.

Yet many married couples do not experience the fulfillment of God’s plan of marriage. Someone says, “My spouse offers very little companionship.” Someone else says, “My spouse hardly ever helps out around the house.” Another person says, “My spouse is distant, not intimate with me.” Someone else says, “We fight like cats and dogs. We disagree about in-laws, kids, domestic duties, and finances. We hardly know what it is to have unity in our marriage.” Perhaps there are some men who would say, “I know that I am supposed to be the head of my home, but my wife doesn’t respect me, and doesn’t follow me.”

Added to these internal problems, many marriages have to struggle with external problems outside our control. The most difficult would include the death of a child, a major financial setback, and a major illness, to name a few. Any significant change is a seedbed for conflict. As changes happen in the family, conflict is inevitable. So problems both within and without can put great pressure on a marriage.

So in contrast with God’s plan for marriage, many experience far less than God’s plan for their marriage. Someone said, “They say marriages are made in heaven, but so are thunder and lightning.”<sup>1</sup> Too many marriages experience more storms than peace. Someone else said, “Love is blind, but marriage is a real eye-opener.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, too many marriages break up, and end in divorce, which is one of the most difficult experiences of life. It is more tragic in its consequences than an accident, loss of health, loss of position, or loss of income.

God always upholds His high standards for human relationships. I must do the same. But He is also a God of grace. He alone can help bridge the gap between the divine ideal, and human failure. This morning I want to offer hope to those whose hearts are hurting due to a troubled marriage.

Now it is a fact that all married couples will have problems. But when problems develop in a marriage, what should you do? That is the question I hope to answer this morning from God’s Word. And if you are not married, I want you to know that much of what I will say this morning will apply to other types of relationships.

Now the first thing you should do is this:

## I. RENEW A COMMITMENT TO RESOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS

Problems are opportunities for God to work. The children of Israel faced the Egyptian Army with their backs to the Sea. That was a problem! But God showed up, and parted the Sea.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Clint Eastwood, *Reader's Digest*, Feb. '07, p.107.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Paula Deen on the Food Network in *Reader's Digest*, June 05, page 73.

So don't be defeated by your problems. Instead, you should do the following as your face problems in your marriage:

A. Remember Your Vows – Based on Mal. 2:14 & Romans 7:2, a Christian marriage is a binding covenant between husband and wife that lasts for a lifetime. And because of the covenant nature of marriage, you probably were required to vow that you would keep your spouse “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.” Sticking to your vows is very important. Dr. Kinsey said that after talking to thousands of people, he determined that the number one element necessary for a successful marriage was a determination and commitment to make the relationship succeed. Commitment carries you through marriage. Commitment means a willingness to endure problems & unhappiness in the short term in order to keep your marriage together for the long term.

The same principle applies to friendships. To have a lasting friendship, you need to have an unconditional commitment to keep the relationship going.

The next step goes with the first:

B. Reject the Divorce Option - How do you face problems? Do you have a tendency to run from your problems? I hope not! Don't run to a divorce lawyer at the first sign of trouble. Is running from your problems the way to deal with marriage problems? Running from a problem doesn't really solve the problem, unless you're running from a killer. A 10-year study of divorced spouses indicated that only 10% felt their lives had been improved by divorce! Isn't it better to face your problems, and seek to solve them? So throw away your parachute when you get married. Don't think of bailing out.

Especially if you have children, I can't emphasize enough how important it is to resolve your problems and keep your marriage together. A divorce will bring lasting damage and hurt to you, your children, and your family. Of course if your spouse violates their marriage vows, and insists on a separation & divorce, there is not much you can do except pray for God's intervention. But if both partners in a marriage are willing to remember their marriage vows, and reject the divorce option, then your marriage is much more likely to stay together.

So once you renew your commitment to your spouse, then you should:

## II. RECONCILE YOUR MARRIAGE PROBLEMS

The Bible teaches that we should seek reconciliation when there are problems in our relationships. Jesus said in Mt. 5:23-25, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly....” Jesus teaches that we cannot be right with God if we are not right with others. So we must always seek to reconcile our relationships. We are to be like God. We read in 2 Cor. 5:19 “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself....” We read in the previous verse that God “has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” We are to lead other sinners to turn from their sin and receive the God's offer of forgiveness through His Son Jesus Christ. But if we are going to reconcile others to God, we need to practice reconciliation in our own lives.

Now there are several things you can do to make progress toward reconciliation, and overcome problems in your marriage:

A. Deal with the Root Problem of Self-Centeredness - When a couple is having trouble getting along, the root problem is self-centeredness in one or both marriage partners. Some spouses say, "It's my way, or the highway." Notice what will happen when selfishness is asserted in a marriage. Turn over to James 4:1-3, where he says, "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." From this text we see that self-centeredness will produce many problems in marriage, including friction and conflict. Is that what you want?

Furthermore, the "me first" attitude is what will ultimately kill a marriage! The most common justification for divorce that I hear from Christians today is, "God wouldn't want me to be unhappy!" Talk about a hook! Satan has attacked God's standard for marriage and compromised countless Christians by the well-hidden hook of selfishness.<sup>3</sup>

Once you recognize that self-centeredness is a problem, you need to know how to overcome the problem. First:

1. Make sure you have been born again - Selfishness is a basic aspect of our sin nature. Even though we are selfish by nature, we can be changed through a new birth experience. 2 Cor. 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." This is yet another reason why a Christian should not marry a non-Christian. They have far less ability to overcome the problem of self-centeredness. If they will not even surrender their self-will to God, they certainly will not do so for you.

When there are problems in your marriage, stop and evaluate if they are due to any self-centeredness on your part. If so:

2. Repent of your selfishness; confess it as a sin (1 Jn. 1:9). The Bible also talks about dying to self and dying to sin.

3. *Practice* being unselfish – In order to change our character and our habits, we have to make a conscious decision to practice new actions. So make a conscious effort to put your spouse first. Cultivate a habit of being considerate of others. Give of your time in service. Give to meet needs. All the while, trust in God's enabling grace to help you live unselfishly.

Now once you deal with the demon of self-centeredness, then you can take the next step:

## B. Work Out Your Problems

1. Do It Without Delay - Perhaps most of us have a tendency to delay reconciliation once a problem has developed. Or we have a tendency to hope that problems will just go away on their own, given enough time. So instead of dealing with marital problems, one person may become quite and withdrawn. The other will respond in like manner. And married couples can become cold toward one another for days and even longer. One reason for this is stubbornness. We will refuse to take the first step and give in to our spouse. Stubbornness turns holy wedlock into an unholy deadlock.

What does God say about this? Look at Ephesians 4:26-27, "Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil." Someone has to initiate reconciliation. The offender *should* take the first step, as we noted in Matt. 5. But sometimes it is not so clear who the offender really is. In such cases the husband, as the head of the home,

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Brown, *SBC Life*, January 2005, page 10.

should take the first step to reconcile the marriage. But in reality, the person who is more mature and spiritually stronger often has to take the first step toward reconciliation.

2. Handle Conflict with Fairness – There has to be some give and take. Try to resolve conflict in such a way that you both gain something. Try to understand your partner's perspective through questioning. Listen to their suggested solutions. Listen as much as you talk.

In contrast, don't resort to manipulation tactics such as withholding what your partner wants or needs until they give in. Don't pay evil for evil. Don't use anger or abuse to get your way during conflict. Someone said, "The right temperature in a home is maintained by warm hearts, not hot heads" [Old Union Reminder in *Pulpit Helps*, Illus.#C-955]. Anger usually results from someone or something blocking the fulfillment of a self-centered goal. But remember, James 1:19-20 says, "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God." One problem with anger is that it often produces hurtful words. Look with me at Ephesians 4:29. Paul says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." Too many couples get angry and use profanity, which only makes things worse. Then v.31 says, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor [shouting], and evil speaking [slander] be put away from you, with all malice." Bitterness results from prolonged unresolved anger. Don't let bitterness destroy your marriage. Don't shout at your partner with angry words. Don't slander your partner's character. Just resolve that you will put aside anger while you are seeking to resolve problems in your marriage. Be loving, gracious, and fair toward your partner.

3. Seek Christian Counseling if You Have Trouble Reconciling – Sometimes you need outside help, and an outside perspective. Don't be too proud to seek help.

Now let's just suppose that your spouse is not cooperating as much as you would like. You want to reconcile these problems, but he or she just doesn't seem to be moving to meet you anywhere close to halfway. What should you do? First, you can pray for more patience. Resolving problems may take time. In the mean time, you need to practice forbearance. Look back at Ephesians 4:2-3, where Paul says, "with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Sometimes you just need to bear with or overlook your partner's faults. After all, 1 Cor. 13:7 says that love "bears all things." Furthermore, you can pray and learn to be more content. Philippians 4:11 says, "...I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." Hebrews 13:5 says, "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (cf. 1 Timothy 6:8). Perhaps you need to be more content with the spouse that you have chosen, warts and all. One thing we all need is unconditional acceptance.

Now what happens when problems are the result of sin or self-centeredness? I have already said that we should repent of it, and confess it as sin. And that leads to my third main point in dealing with marriage problems:

### III. RESTORE FELLOWSHIP THROUGH FORGIVENESS

When Cheryl & I were married, our pastor included Ephesians 4:32 in our wedding ceremony, and I have done the same for others. There Paul wrote, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." It is wrong to hold on to anger and resentment against your spouse, especially when they have recognized their faults,

and have asked for forgiveness. God has forgiven you; you should extend that same grace to others, especially a family member. You may have to forgive that person for the same thing over and over again, for Jesus requires it. He said to forgive 70 times 7 (Mt. 18:21ff). Furthermore, I should point out one characteristic of true love that Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 13:5. At the end of that verse Paul says that love “does not keep a record of wrongs.” If you keep reminding your spouse of the sin they committed against you 10 years ago, have you truly forgiven him or her? And why would you even want to hold on to bad memories? Every time we recall an injury, we hit the “play” button on the VCR in our minds and we get wounded one more time.<sup>4</sup>

The book of Hosea illustrates that fact that a marriage can be restored through forgiveness. The prophet Hosea married a woman who was unfaithful to him and yet he brought her back, forgave her, and restored her. He was also an illustration of God, who forgave Israel over and over again.

Have you forgiven your spouse? Are you still holding on to a grudge? Has unforgiveness created a wall between you and your spouse? If so, you need to forgive, so your marriage can be healed. Forgive, and reconciliation will be complete. One of the sweetest times in a marriage is when a couple reconciles and forgives.

Now there is one other main point I want to make about resolving problems in your marriage:

#### IV. REKINDLE LOVE THROUGH MUTUAL LOVING MINISTRY

Problems in a marriage tend to cause us to lose the positive feelings we had toward our spouse. But true love is unconditional. It is not based on feeling, but is a matter of choosing to love your partner by ministering their needs. This is just the opposite of being self-centered. Paul says in Phil. 2:4, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” In the great Love chapter, 1 Cor. 13, Paul wrote in v.5 that love “...does not seek its own.” The mature, loving individuals will go into marriage not only for what they can get out of it, but for what they can give to their partners. Rekindle love by doing things for your partner that you know they will enjoy and appreciate.

Now when love is expressed in this way, good feelings will *follow*. And when you are in a positive relationship with someone; when you have good feelings toward someone, you tend to overlook the small problems. So work on loving mutual ministry with your partner, which is essential for a good marriage. This mutual ministry is described in 1 Cor. 7:3, where Paul says, “Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.” When you seek to minister to the needs of your spouse, you are fulfilling a Christ-like task. Jesus said in Mt. 20:28, “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and give His life a ransom for many.” By what we do and what we say, we should seek to minister to one another. This mutual ministry is also described in Gal. 6:2, where Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” So husbands and wives, understand that God has called you to minister to the needs of your spouse. Accept that calling. Though they should look to the Lord first for meeting their personal needs, your responsibility is also to help them feel loved and feel worthwhile as persons.

As I have stated, this kind of ministry should be mutual. Illustration: I read of a son who called to wish his parents a happy New Year. His dad answered the phone. “Well, Dad, what’s your New Year’s resolution?” he asked. His father replied rather proudly, “To make your

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<sup>4</sup> Kent Crockett, *The 911 Handbook*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1997.

mother as happy as I can all year.” Then his Mom got on, and he said, “What’s your resolution, Mom?” She said, “To see that your dad keeps *his* New Year’s resolution.”<sup>5</sup> That sounds a little one sided to me! Or perhaps she is the one who has been doing most of the ministry through the years.

Now there are two steps that you need to make to minister to the needs of your spouse. First:

A. Become Aware of your Partner’s Needs – 1 Peter 3:7 says, “Husbands, likewise, dwell with [your wives] with understanding....” We all have some basic personal needs. These include our need for love, acceptance, approval, and significance. But here we need to understand the differences between men and women. You should not love and minister to your spouse in the same way that *you* want to be ministered to. For example, a woman wants love to be communicated verbally, but men are moved more by other ways of showing love.

Now this brings up an important point. We need to open up and tell our spouses what our needs & wishes are. Don’t expect your spouse to be able to read your mind. Or don’t think, “Well, he ought to know how I feel.” No, he probably doesn’t. Your girlfriend understands how you feel, but your husband doesn’t, because he’s a man, and men have different needs, and think differently. So in a non-condemning way, share how you feel, and suggest some specific ways your spouse can meet your needs. Your goal is to vulnerably reveal yourself, legitimately desiring, but never demanding, a loving response.

B. Trust the Lord to Help You Meet Your Partner’s Need - Relationships are complicated. And that’s because people are complicated. So many of us struggle with a sense of inadequacy. We feel it is difficult to believe that we have the resources to bear fruit in our ministry of marriage. So we need to realize that we can effectively minister when we rely on God to give us the adequacy we need. Paul said in 2 Cor. 3:5, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves ..., but our sufficiency is from God.”

Now let me close with an example of how this is to work. Let’s suppose Sam comes home from work, tired from a long day. As he approaches the door, perhaps his unconscious goal is for his wife, Edna to greet him warmly and treat him to a cold glass of tea. Instead, she welcomes him by asking, “Why are you so late? You said you’d be home by six and it’s nearly seven.” Now what she has said has not ministered to him by any means, but what is he going to do or say? Some men would fuss right back in anger. Others would defend their late arrival, blaming certain circumstances. Some would ignore her and go wash up for dinner. But none of those responses would minister to the needs of Edna. Now what should he do if he applied the principles that we have talked about? He needs to remember that his goal is to minister to his wife’s needs, and look to the Lord to help him. So he should think something like, “My goal right now is to let my wife know that she is loved and she is a special woman to me. In her mind, she perceives my being late as a sign that she is not important to me. So I need to take steps to reassure her that she is important to me; she is loved.” So he may choose to apologize for failing to let her know that he would be late. Then he may give her a warm hug [she’s not ready for a kiss!]. Then he speaks words to reassure her of his love. Isn’t that better and more productive than the other more common responses that couples use?

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<sup>5</sup> *Reader’s Digest*, January 1999, p.80.

Conclusion: Don't you want to keep your marriage together? Don't you want to experience reconciliation and peace in your marriage? Then remember your marriage vows, reconcile problems as they develop, always be ready to forgive your spouse, and rekindle love through loving, mutual ministry.

Look to God at all times. He has set the example of committed, unconditional love. He seeks to reconcile us to Himself. He forgives. He ministers to our deepest needs. As you experience a growing relationship with God in Christ, you can become more and more like Him.

Sources: Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., *The Marriage Builder* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Robert & Carrie Dale, *Making Good Marriages Better* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978); Tim Lahaye, *How To Be Happy Though Married* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1968); Lightner-Laing, *Success In Family Living* (Denver, CO: B/P Publications, 1977); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Charles R. Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1974); Norman Williams, *The Christian Home* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1952). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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