

The Mystery of the Marriage Covenant

Paul the Apostle, apparently single, observed that marriage is a *great mystery* (Eph. 5:31). After a few years of marriage, we all agree.

But who doesn't love a mystery? God surveyed his new Creation on the sixth day and noticed that Adam was lonely. "*It is not good that man should be alone*" (Gen. 2:18). Marriage begins in the basic human need for companionship and ends in a painful separation—either by death or by estrangement. All the years between are spent slowly learning the mysterious interdependence of two minds and hearts.

Marriage Is First a Friendship

New couples walk through the normal friendship-forming stages of discovery, delight, trust, and loyalty. They begin with discovery—gradually revealing their likes and dislikes to each other. This is always risky business, especially if you know very little about the other. My first conversation with my future wife was about poetry. I took the calculated risk that she would care more about books than bear hunting and scored immediately. She did love many of the same books I did, and the hook was set. We went on to discover many other common interests, and thirty years later we still love to quote Dickinson and Eliot to each other.

Some couples live in differing intellectual worlds, and one may struggle to share the interests of the other. But a strong marriage is one in which both partners genuinely enjoy conversation and at least some pastimes together—walking, for example, if nothing else.

Discovery leads to delight, which is quickly followed by the sharing and loyalty common to all friendships. With time, familiarity begets a comfortable companionship.

Aristotle claimed there are three kinds of friendship: *Useful friends*, like your business associates, *pleasurable friends*, the kind who are entertaining, and *virtuous friends*, the people who share your values and make you a better person. New couples often find each other *pleasurable friends* at first, but unless they move to the level of *virtuous* friendship, they will have a rough road ahead when the laughter ends.

Solomon called the sparks between a man and a maid "too wonderful" for description. The desire between them accelerates the forming of bonds, and very quickly they want to commit their lives to each other forever. They write

and speak to each other in romantic exaggeration, and they think they would die for each other, but they don't really understand what that means yet.

Marriage Is Sustained by a Covenant, Not Romance

In music, film, and literature, Western culture has always celebrated the trope of "falling in love." Our fascination with romance is not primarily rooted in physical desires, but springs rather from a deep desire for belonging. We instinctively respond to the fantasy of an irresistible attraction. Some try to deny it, but most young women find the prospect of being swept off their feet by handsome prince charming a delightful possibility.

And naturally every couple likes to believe their own love story is unique and amazing. But the popular emphasis on a passionate and magical connection has a dark catch. It casts the couple as helplessly succumbing to a mysteriously irresistible desire that is greater than them and "meant to be."

This is all very exciting at first, but romantic passion is not strong enough to hold a marriage together. That exists only in pulp fiction and Hallmark cards and Pinterest memes. Millions of spouses—to great tragedy--discover that the attraction to the next man or woman is just as irresistible. If love comes calling, how can you help it? As long as passion is idolized, the devil has an easy time destroying marriages.

Christian marriages are held together in the long term by a covenant. Romantic attraction draws two souls together, but it is not stable enough to be the primary binding agent. This does not mean that loyalty in marriage is just some austere, legal tie. In fact, the emotional security provided by unconditional commitment nourishes a unique quality of romance that only people with long, loyal marriages understand.

"What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). Unlike other friendships, marriage is sealed by vows of permanent loyalty. With a mere "I will", we commit to a legally binding pact that has financial, hereditary, social, and eternal implications. The pact is recorded in the courthouse and in heaven. We can pay a high price to have it struck from the courthouse record, but only death will alter God's record book.

Love and Respect: The Mysterious Essentials

On several occasions, Paul gave married couples a very simple principle for success: *Husbands, love her; wives, submit to him.*

At first glance, the advice seems oddly incomplete. But every couple learns quickly that Paul put his finger on a fundamental difference between men and women. The man and the woman are each being asked to do the *one thing* that will be the biggest challenge in their relationship.

A woman tends to find her greatest fulfillment out of being desired for *what she is*. A man tends to find his greatest fulfillment out of being recognized for *what he can do*.

And sure enough, with our differing natures, we tend to neglect the very thing our spouse needs most. A husband forgets to *cherish* his wife enough, to make her feel special, to pay attention to her need for close connection. A wife forgets to admire her husband's work and honor his leadership.

So we have a mysterious *quid pro quo*, in which we exchange love for honor in a very specific direction. This can be a virtuous cycle, where the more the husband cherishes his wife, the more she respects his leadership, which increases his affection for her, and so on. Tragically, it can just as easily become a vicious cycle, where the less a husband cherishes his wife, the less she respects him, which makes him even colder toward her, and so on.

When things go downhill, spouses quickly learn the power of withholding the very thing their mate needs. The most hurtful thing a husband can do to his wife is to compare her unfavorably to other women. The deepest stab a wife can give her husband's heart is to compare his accomplishments unfavorably with other men.

But the leverage is self-destructive and the unhappy couple spirals downward. "I would respect him if he'd ever take time to sit down and talk." "I could love her if she'd stop cutting me down and making me feel like a financial loser."

As men, we can feel awkward teaching about the submission of women, partly because we're influenced by the gender role accusations of feminism, and partly because—well, asking for fiat loyalty to our own spotty leadership makes us uneasy. But somehow nobody thinks it's touchy to ask men to love their wives unconditionally. The wisdom of Paul is that love and respect will die unless we offer them unconditionally.

The Holy Spirit Turns Marriage into a Miracle of Grace

Years ago I met a couple who assured me they had a very strong marriage. Later in the conversation the husband admitted that he found it hard to read his Bible and find time to pray. That was likely a deceived husband. He may have meant that their marriage was not a disaster, but it was not likely a strong marriage.

Each spouse has a God-sized hole in their lives. Only Christ can fill that. If you try to fill that hole with the wonderful love of your spouse, you will unwittingly sap your marriage of joy, and sabotage it with guilt and negativity. Only a regular spiritual communion with God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can bring you the soul rest that allows your marriage to flourish.

Are Christian marriages the only good marriages? What about all the seemingly stable and loving marriages of non-Christians around the world? Well, millions of people without the Holy Spirit's indwelling also serve unselfishly, perform useful labor, invent helpful solutions, create lasting art, and generally reflect some degree of the image of God. We do not believe in total depravity. But every marriage in which one or both partners are not filled with the Holy Spirit will be enervated by some level of selfishness and tension which will prevent it from being a truly strong marriage.

Furthermore, when one spouse carries unreconciled injuries of the soul—from past trauma, from past sinful habits, from crippling emotional instability—marriage becomes a disappointment. They lean on their spouse for healing which only God can provide. Unsurprisingly, such spouses often pursued marriage in the first place as the answer to their pain. It is a logical conclusion, but ultimately fails to deliver.

Tim Keller notes how Paul compares marriage with Christ's cultivating love for His bride—the church. “That he might sanctify and cleanse it...that he might present it to himself a glorious church” (Eph. 5:27). Notice the language of beautifying! Christ did not “fall in love” with us. He chose us and believed we could become beautiful.

When we're first married, we're diamonds in the rough, at best. We stumble at learning to get along. But if we submit to God's grace we gradually polish each other in the gemstone tumbler of life. Our marriage can become something “glorious”, both to God and to others observing us.

This takes great commitment and submission, but the result is that we can together “be presented to himself” a glorious couple at the end of life. A marvel of grace!

Peter and Paul both suggest that this beautifying of the marriage lies strongly upon the shoulders of the husband. “*Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered*”(1 Pet.3:7)

The grace of life is a lovely thing in a marriage.

The Mysterious Strength of a Maturing Marriage

In part 1 we looked at how marriage is first a friendship and how the covenantal nature of marriage provides permanence. We also studied the advice of the apostles Paul and Peter on the unconditional role of love and respect. Now we shift to considering God's provisions for common challenges in marriage.

Marriage Changes Two People Mysteriously but Surely

Let's begin with two wonderful quotations Tim Keller provided in *The Meaning of Marriage*.

"We always marry the wrong person... We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is... learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married." - Stanley Hauerwas

"When I married my wife I had hardly a smidgen of sense for what I was getting into with her. How could I know how much she would change over 25 years? How could I know how much I would change? My wife has lived with at least five different men since we were wed, and each of the five has been me." -Lewis Smedes

How utterly true. I grew up in a stoic German family where we learned early in life to keep a stiff upper lip. We kept the lid on outward emotional expressions—both happy and sad. It seemed to be an unspoken aspect of modesty. Tears and kisses were intimate things, not to be exposed to the public.

My wife came from a cry-and-hug, blow-up and kiss-up Southern family. When we started our friendship, we had a serious cultural gap to close. Many times in our early marriage we completely misread each other's signals. She thought my family was cold, and I thought her family was childishly dramatic. But after twenty-eight years I think I have learned to give hugs and shed some tears (if things are really tragic). And she, God bless her, has leveled off her expressions over the years, possibly because of my stoic influence, or possibly because it didn't work.

God also allows circumstances to change us in the course of our marriage.

Death, disappointment, loss of health, and financial reverses turn us into different people. My wife and I traveled through years of childlessness and the uncertain journey of building a family when all the doors seemed closed. This changed us tremendously, although it is amazing how trials alone are not enough to prune all the selfishness out of the marriage.

The added burdens of responsibility—for children, for leadership at work or in the church—all of these will change us into a different spouse, but not automatically a better one. God still has plenty of scope for *"working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight"* (Heb. 13:21).

The burdens and losses can also crush our spirits, or poison us with bitterness. God be merciful to the marriage that falls down this vortex, because it can feel unstoppable. It requires much greater time spent together and much greater love, that *"your prayers are not hindered."*

A common foolish notion of spouses caught in marital strife is that they think they can't change. "She's always trying to change me into the perfect husband." "He expects me to be a Proverbs 31 woman, like his wonderful mom."

The truth is, we change all the time. Yet we feel threatened when our spouse implies that we need to change our behavior. We dig in our heels to preserve what we imagine is some self-respect or autonomy, but ironically, our stubbornness is changing us at that very moment. It would be comical if it weren't so destructive.

Little Injuries Can Destroy a Great Marriage

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes" (Songs 2:15).

"Catch the little critters", says Solomon. There are always tiny but destructive pests that nibble at a beautiful marriage. No marriage is immune. If the foxes aren't caught and dispatched, a loving couple becomes a fighting couple much sooner than they could imagine.

It starts with simple selfishness. Edward Sri, in *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* says he sometimes tells new couples the real definition of marriage is "Never getting what you want." The Apostle Paul already explained that two thousand years ago. Loving my wife as Christ loves means that I love her even when her plan for my evening means I give up mine. Submitting to my husband implies that my will conflicts with his will, but I yield to his will anyway.

If you start letting yourself get irritated at how your husband holds his silverware or how your wife buys clothes, you will feed the foxes instead of catching them. The first step downward is to pay attention to the quirks in your spouse.

Once irritation sets in, the next step is to withhold the tokens of affection. Why make him a special dinner if he's a boor? Why spend time sitting with her on the porch if she never stops whining about how the other sisters at church treat her?

A little seed of irritation toward your wife is a giant opening to start paying attention to another woman. Many a man has left a tense breakfast with his wife and found a woman at work who is all too ready to admire him and gratify his ego—often because she left a cold husband at home and badly

wants a man to listen to her. The thing feeds on itself and goes into a death spiral. *"Why will you be ravished with the strange woman?... He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray"*(Prov. 5:20,23).

Then one or both spouses notice the subtle changes and fear plants suspicion in their hearts. The guilty spouse who has started investing emotionally in another person assumes his spouse is capable of this too. One or both of them start hiding their plans and activities from each other, which only feeds the fear. It's not a healthy sign if either spouse takes great care to keep their phone out of the other's reach at all times. Affairs and pornography are easy medication for cold hearts, and the end is death.

At some horrible point, the first angry words are exchanged, and accusations come boiling out of hurt souls. This is often followed by remorse, apologies, promises to improve. But the damage is real, and once the first openly hurtful actions have scarred the marriage, the likelihood that a cycle of abuse and apology will develop is tragically high.

And Lord have mercy on a couple who takes off the gloves. No one can hurt you so keenly as the person you have loved so long. Two people who know each other's dreams and fears know exactly where to pinch, what sore places to poke, dreams to dash, weaknesses to mock, insecurities to leverage, failures to expose. A bitter wife can cut down her husband and stomp on the last shred of his self-respect. A selfish man can humiliate his lovely bride and drag her to the lowest pits of worthlessness and despair.

Before long, pain and anger overcomes their pride, and they begin to quarrel publicly, leveraging shame to drive in the dagger as they belittle their spouse in front of friends or strangers. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" is the proverb rooted in this ugliness.

The lowest point is when words turn into violence, and hands that once caressed are punching, clawing, and pulling hair. I've seen this first-hand in public places. It's unspeakably nasty & soul-crushing. It's also quite common. According to US homicide statistics, the most likely person to murder a woman is her husband or boyfriend.

Oh but we'd never kill our spouse. Only psychopaths do that, right? Well, the news headlines seem to tell another story. Plenty of "respectable" spouses have plunged into unthinkable schemes for escaping a marriage.

Just start getting irritated with your husband's irresponsible ways or your wife's quirks. Just start admiring how entertaining, or successful, or smart another man is compared to your husband. Just start joking around with that good-looking salesgirl at your place of work and tell yourself it's all in good fun. Just let yourself get drawn down the slopes on YouTube or FaceBook and

feed your unmet desires on all the beautiful and seemingly available women on the screen.

"Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death" (Prov. 7:27). The road to destruction is not long when selfishness is at the wheel.

Healing Begins with One Small Act of Grace

What if you feel your marriage is stuck in a blame cycle? You hate the senseless go-arounds, the same old triggers bringing the same old storms. The same tired accusations and the same irritating self-defense arguments that neither of you believe. But you feel helpless to stop it.

How does healing start? It begins by one spouse doing one act of grace. One small concession. One "I'm sorry." One token of love. One thoughtfulness, that says "I did this for you."

If it takes two to quarrel, it only takes one to stop. One side can start the healing process. Peter encourages wives to submit to unbelieving husbands so that the husband might be converted by the loving example of the wife. (1 Peter 3)

Yes, this takes faith. Your spouse may be suspicious of the new behavior. But it will change the direction of the wind. No, buying roses or taking her out to dinner will not make her forget your mean words. But small acts of unselfish love repeated day by day will stop the blame game and open the door to healing.

The root cause of marriage problems is sin. Counselors try to paste other diagnoses over top, psychiatrists offer convenient disorders, doctors treat it with chemicals, and deceitful pastors call it incompatibility.

But we cannot be more gracious than God is. If we call marriage problems a disorder, the victims have a hopeless lifetime ahead of them, with only medications for relief. If we call it sin, it can be confessed, cleansed, and healed. (1 John 1:9) Healing requires repentance, not just roses.

The Mystery of a Wonderful Marriage Unfolds Over Time

In the first glow of marriage, we think romance will always bind us together in blissful harmony. We see no faults. We sing with Solomon. *"Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee."*

The truth is, we don't really know yet. Another Tim Keller quote: "We think we love this person, but we actually love our idea of this person." It takes years of revelation to get to know your spouse.

But the passion is real, the heart-fluttering excitement of finding a mate whose eyes sparkle at your presence, who hangs on your every word and action—is immensely gratifying. The emotional and physical bonding of

sexual intimacy in marriage compounds the attraction. The Proverb writer—who seemed capable of describing a great many complexities—truly ran out of words on this point. The “way of a man with a maid” is indescribable.

The second stage in marriage is when we discover, and learn to avoid, the hot buttons. *“Why did she flare up over my little comment about the salad?”*
“Why is he giving me the silent treatment? I just said it would be nice if he would be home in time for dinner...”

Jay Adams says, “The pressures of marriage have a way of bringing out defects. You can’t place two sinners—even redeemed ones—under the same roof, at close range, day after day, without such pressures.”

Avoiding the touchy spots is important progress, but it is still not maturity. The third and strongest stage in a mature marriage is when we have truly accepted the weaknesses in our spouse and have learned how to offset them with our strengths. This is the real beauty of marriage.

Jack Sprat and his wife had a little teamwork going on, and every couple can find this sweet spot in dozens of ways. My wife loves olives and I love gherkins. When those two sides are served on the same platter, we get along like peanut butter and jam.

Or it can be in natural giftings. My wife excels at remembering quotations and names and the plots of books we have both read. I depend on her memory for illustrations in my writing.

“What’s the name of the priest in that story, you know, where the five people fall off the rope bridge in South America?”

She, without looking up from her book, *“Brother Juniper.”*

In return, she leans on me for spelling. *“How many n’s are in Renaissance?”*

The complementarity of skills, fears, and loves takes years to come into full bloom in a great marriage. I love to watch an older couple where the wife listens attentively to her husband telling a story that she surely has heard dozens of times over the decades. Or to see a husband tactfully changing the subject at a tense moment in a social situation when his wife is looking distressed.

There’s nothing so ugly as a couple with years of experience bickering and quarreling. And there’s nothing more beautiful than a couple with decades of practice covering for each other’s flaws and fears—truly making each other more glorious than they could have been alone—and showing their children a gracious and beautiful marriage.

The old folk song, “Silver Threads Among the Gold” might sound corny to modern ears, but the expressions of unfading love and commitment into old

age are a testimony to unselfishness that our world sorely needs to hear today. *Darling, I am growing old, / Silver threads among the gold, / Shine upon my brow today. / Life is fading fast away. / But, my darling, you will be / Always young and fair to me.*

If you can keep seeing your bride as the “lily of the valley” while the decades take their toll, if you can see your groom as a mighty prince out of the wilderness, and say, *“His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend”*, you will have shown your children how glorious a covenant marriage is.

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death” (Songs 8:6).

-James S Martin