

When your marriage is crumbling... build on a new foundation # 3 in “Greatest Sermon in History”

The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus’ timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

Message for Sunday, April 18, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:27-32 and others

1) Marriage is precious... How is yours?

Why is adultery so terrible? Why does Jesus speak so strongly against it? The simple answer is: Because God made marriage to be wonderful. And adultery can destroy a marriage:

Matthew 5:31-32, New International Version:

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

Let’s have some background to this. During Jesus’ life, the main cultures in that part of the world were the Jewish, Greek and Roman. In each one of these cultures, morals and values had degenerated so far that society was beginning to fall apart. Marriage was no longer sacred among any of them — divorce was easy and common among all three. (Hmmm... Is this starting to sound familiar?)

Into this condition Jesus re-instituted the sacredness of marriage. Listen to what he said on another occasion when people wanted to test him on this controversial subject:

Matthew 19:3-9, New International Version:

Some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Jesus told us that marriage, in its ideal form, is to be a life-long commitment. It was that way in the beginning, and it has always been God’s plan for marriage. Again: God made marriage to be wonderful! Whenever God commands us to do something, he always provides us the means to do it. That’s what I want to talk about today — the keys for building a marriage which will last.

Please note that Jesus is giving the *principle* for marriage, *not* a law. Time and again Jesus taught by principles, and despised those who sought to make religion a legalistic matter. Sometimes we humans fall short of God’s ideals. Even Christians fail in their marriages. My own belief is that this passage is not meant as a *law*, which says that you may never again marry, if you are divorced. I say this because the Scriptures also teach about forgiveness and a new life for those who sincerely repent of their sins. I believe there is hope, even for those whose marriages are already beyond the point of recovery.

2) A Firm Foundation for Your Marriage

Since marriage is so precious in God’s Word, it stands to reason that we will find guidance to help make marriages work. We are not disappointed. I want to share with you three main keys laid out in the Scriptures for those who wish to build their marriage on a firm foundation. James Dobson in his book *Love for a Lifetime* calls them “The Three C’s.”

a) Christ-centred home

If both husband and wife are deeply committed to Jesus Christ, they have a rock solid foundation on which to build their marriage. Just think: knowing Jesus Christ changes people’s lives. He frees us from sin; he gives meaning and purpose to life; he gives us the power to love, even our enemies. When two people who are both following Jesus Christ come together, they have they have a divine bond holding them together.

Specifically, how do you make a Christ-centred home?

1. Prayer

What an incredible privilege we have, being able to talk directly with God! When things are going well or looking bad, we can take it all to God in prayer. In this

day of families fall apart all around us, why would anyone want to attempt to make it on their own? Oh, my friends, I encourage you — I plead with you — make prayer a vital part of your daily life.

Even more, I ask you — if you don't do this already — to pray together as a couple. Joining your hearts and souls together with God is simply the best medicine a marriage can have. And it tastes great, too! Here are a couple of examples:

- You can pray for each other when you have problems. This is like a spiritual back rub, for it is a wonderful experience to hear someone else talk with God on your behalf.
- When you have a disagreement, talking it over with God has a wonderful way of helping you to see things in a new way.

2. Values and priorities

How do you spend your money as a couple? That shows a great deal about your priorities. When you sit down together and plan your budget... [you *do* talk together about your money, and you *do* plan your spending, don't you?]. . . talk about your values and your faith.

All of this brings me to the second key...

b) Communication

I've just mentioned how vital communication is in a marriage.

Most conversations that couples have are the kind of things they could fax to one another:

"I'll take the car to the garage to get fixed after work today."

"I'll take the other car, then, and do the shopping."

This is *not* what I mean by vital communication!

One big problem to communication is that God made men and women differently. Research has shown that females, from the time they are little girls, are much more talkative than males. Secondly, females are more skilled at interpersonal relationships than males. Put these together and you have a recipe for silence, not communication!

This scene is a stereotype, but it's one of the most common complaints that marriage counsellors hear:

Husband and wife come home from work. The wife wants to talk about her day, and to hear how he's feeling, how his day was, what he thinks about the children, and especially how he feels about her. The

husband has spent the whole day talking with customers and colleagues, and all he wants is to read the paper and relax. The last thing he wants is to talk, especially to talk about his feelings.

Let's take this scene a bit further. Suppose this wife, instead of working at an outside job, has stayed home all day to look after their children. By the time evening comes, she will be emotionally starved for an adult relationship.

What we have here is a recipe for frustration.

Women: you should not expect your husbands to meet *all* of your emotional needs. You still need your girlfriends just as much after marriage as before.

But there's more. Jesus recalled the Biblical definition of marriage: "**the two shall become one flesh**" [Matthew 19:5]. I don't think he meant that marriage is all about sex. When two people marry, they are giving themselves to one another, body and soul. Achieving intimacy in the body is relatively simple. Achieving intimacy in the soul is much more complex.

That's basically what communication is: intimacy in the soul. It is sharing yourselves with one another: telling your secrets, your desires, your dreams, your fears.

Men: We need to talk — *really talk* — with our wives. It's vital for the health of the marriage.

I have written on the back cover of the bulletin some conversation starters, if you need help in beginning this in your marriage.

c) Commitment

There have been many versions of the wedding vows, but they always end with these words (or their equivalent): "as long as we both shall live." That's a long time! Sometimes people wonder how they can make a promise for the rest of their lives. "How do I know what's going to happen 60 years from now?" they ask.

The answer is simple. A lifelong commitment is lived out day by day. You may have no control over what's going to happen 60 years from now. But you do control your actions for today. Each day you say to yourself [change wording to suit your gender], "Today I am going to be an outstanding husband. I am going to tell my wife how wonderful she is, and that I love her. I will not let anything harm our relationship."

We can never take this for granted. I consider that Jane and I have a good marriage. We do things together, we like each other, we talk with each other (although this message reminds me I have to pick up the pace a bit). But danger is always lurking just around the corner.

Back where we used to live, the hospital depended on volunteers to be chaplains. So I took a turn one day a month, spending the afternoon and evening there. One evening, after I had finished my rounds of the wards, I was sitting in the chaplain's office, reading. The office is among other offices, but everyone else leaves at 5 pm, so that floor is completely deserted in the evening. A cleaning lady came in to collect the garbage and dust the furniture, and we chatted pleasantly. As she was leaning over to pick the papers out of the garbage can, her loose top lay open, and I had a clear view of her entire front (she had a bra on, but just enough to make me curious about the hidden parts).

And curious I was. More than that... I felt myself take a deep breath as I looked. I was attracted, aroused. She was very appealing and, judging by her body language, very available. It would have been so easy to start flirting with her, then slip into some romantic talk. There's a comfortable couch in that room. No one else was on that floor. No one would ever know....

I caught myself in time. "Bruce," I said to myself, "are you crazy? You love Jane, you don't want to hurt her. A few minutes of pleasure isn't worth throwing away your marriage." So I looked away from her, until she was finished leaning over. As she continued her work we chatted a bit more, but that was all. Whew! That was close.

Jesus clearly spoke about the danger of adultery. But he went even further:

Matthew 5:27-28

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

It is not enough to keep our bodies pure. We must also keep our minds and hearts pure. Our eyes are simply windows to what lies within our hearts. If I had kept on gazing at that cleaning woman, I would have been feeding the lust within me, until I would have got to the point of actual adultery. Again: to keep the body pure, we must keep the heart and mind pure. The way to do that is to keep so occupied with pure thoughts and actions, that there is no opportunity for the sin to take root.

But there needs to be more than this day to day commitment. Commitment to a life-long marriage also means an iron-willed determination that we are going to stay together, no matter what happens. Francis Schaeffer once spoke about the bridges in Europe that were built by the Romans during the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. They are still standing today, despite being made with unreinforced brick and mortar. Why haven't they collapsed in this modern era of heavy cars and trucks? One simple reason: they are used only for pedestrians. If an eighteen wheel semi-trailer drove across one of those ancient bridges, it would crumble in a great cloud of dust.

Marriages that lack commitment are like those fragile Roman bridges. They appear to be secure and may indeed remain standing... until they are put under pressure. Then they split apart at the weak spots, and the foundation crumbles.

Unless you have a dogged determination that nothing — no person, no thing, no circumstance, no lottery, absolutely nothing! — is going to break your marriage, then you can be sure that something will.

3) Marriage by the Book

I will close with this Bible passage. These verses written by Paul have more wisdom than most marriage manuals put together. If couples lived by these words, then most divorces would never happen. If you will put them into practice in your marriage, you will do more than just survive as a statistic; you will have a marriage made in heaven. Here it is:

Philippians 2:3-5

Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Have the same attitude that Jesus Christ did.

Theme for today: Do you expect your wife/husband to make you happy? Then you are in for a disappointment. Not because she/he is a poor partner. Rather, it's because God is our greatest source of joy. Looking to someone else to take God's place puts an enormous burden on that person, and is wholly unfair and unreasonable.

But once your soul is filled with delight in God, then even greater joys can be found in the company of a friend or beloved.