

“Because I Said I Would” (2014)

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 ¹

As I’m sure you know, June is one of our two most frequent months for weddings in this country.² In keeping with this tradition, Matt & Anna celebrated their tenth anniversary on June 5th, June 6th was the 45th anniversary of my first date with Jill; and last Tuesday marked the 67th anniversary of my parents’ wedding. All of this, combined with the facts that our video series for the month is about marriage and today is Father’s Day, has inspired me to focus our attention this morning on marriage.

Our text from 1 Corinthians is about marriage as Paul encountered it in the first century. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul was writing to two married believers when he said, “*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*” Almost from cover to cover, the Bible affirms God’s intention that marriage be a life-long commitment, and that divorce is something that God hates.³

In verses 12-16 of our text, Paul’s focus shifts to how to handle the situation when two unbelievers marry and then one of them becomes a follower of Jesus. In that situation, Paul’s hope was that the spouse who became a believer might eventually lead his or her spouse to Christ as well.

Finally, the Bible is quite clear that Christians should marry fellow believers, not unbelievers.⁴ Each of these principles is extremely important; but I want to invite your thought in a slightly different direction this morning as we consider marriage as it exists in our own time.

Developmental psychologists have studied childhood and adolescence extensively, and we have a pretty good understanding about how humans grow and develop during our first twenty years. Much less attention has been paid to human development over the much larger span of our adult years from age twenty to eighty or ninety and beyond. And it has only been in the last forty years or so that psychologists have given much thought to the developmental patterns of marriage.

There are four peaks of divorce in American culture today. The first of these windows of danger takes place in the first two years, when persons who never should have attempted to join their lives at all “run their ships aground” nearly as soon as they put them in the water.

The second window of divorce is so common that it has its own name—“the seven-year itch.” Actually, this second window is more like years seven to ten.

The third window of frequent divorce takes place in years seventeen to twenty. When I was doing marriage counseling all the time I used to call this one “the eighteen-year syndrome.” And the fourth peak of divorce comes when the last child leaves home—when marriages that stayed together “for the sake of the children” “pull the plug” on relationships that had really been dead for a long time.

Now here’s what’s really interesting about all this. If you’ll open the insert in your order of worship to the side that says, “Four Marriages within a Marriage,” the four peaks of divorce I’ve just described correspond to the vertical lines in that table. Those peaks of divorce correspond to “chapter changes” within marriage, and the divorces that take place at those times represent

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 15, 2014.

² December is the other top month for marriage in this culture, and that’s when Jill and I and Nathan and Lisel were married.

³ Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:31-32, 19:9; Mark 10:10-12; Luke 16:18.

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

failures to understand and to navigate the transitions between those chapters. The table on the other side of the handout, “The Life-Cycle of a Marriage,” presents the same information keyed to the typical transitions that come with parenting.

It’s important to note that the information in these tables describes normal marriages, and these stresses and these transitions are quite dependably present in virtually every marriage established since about 1960. They may well have been present in earlier marriages, but nobody was studying marriage in this way back then.

Let’s say a couple comes for marriage counseling at about year twelve. This means that they’re probably stuck either in the transition between Marriage One and Marriage Two or are somewhere in Marriage Two. They come in saying to each other, in effect, “You don’t bring me flowers, you don’t sing me love songs anymore.”⁵

Now while I applaud those couples who are wise enough to seek counsel and encouragement for the health of their marriages, we tend to approach the symptoms of our marriages as we do the symptoms of our bodies—we wait until it’s almost too late to ask for help. So, when a couple comes in during year twelve, experiencing a lot of pain in their relationship, I typically tell them, “You can divorce each other if you want to, but you need to know that if you divorce each other and remarry someone else, you’re going to be back twelve years from now with the same problems.

“Your problem really isn’t each other. Your problem is that you don’t know the next steps of the dance, and you’re going to hit this wall again and again until you buckle down and learn how to move past it. Your marriage vows very intentionally promised faithfulness ‘for better or for worse,’ and this is one of the ‘for worse’ parts—but things doesn’t have to stay like they are now.”

Very briefly, then, here’s how the four chapters of marriage work. In the first chapter of marriage, our developmental task is to establish the foundation of a relationship, to build bridges between two lives and between two families. In this first chapter, love may not actually be “blind,” but we choose to be inattentive to differences, since we’re focusing our attention on building bridges—on what we have in common.

I tell pre-marital couples that there are at least three levels of marital covenant. The first level is the public covenant of the marriage vows themselves. It is with deep wisdom and centuries of experience that those vows have us promise **“to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, according to God’s holy ordinance, until death parts us.”** There are reasons for those words.

The second level of marriage covenant is a laundry list of things that the pre-marital couple has already decided that they’re going to change about the other person once they’re married. This list hasn’t been discussed, but the couple could write their lists if I asked them to. They haven’t talked about their lists because they’re focusing on building bridges, but the lists represent cracks in the buttresses of those bridges even as the concrete begins to set.

The third level of marriage covenant is the most problematic. This covenant has to do with the things each person expects to have happen in the relationship, but that they don’t know they expect and won’t know they expect . . . until they don’t happen. These are those dimensions of life—usually from our families of origin—that we take so much for granted as normal parts of life that it never occurs to us that others might do things differently. The transition from Marriage One

⁵ Alan and Marilyn Bergman, “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers,” Columbia Records, 1978, popularized as a duet by Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond.

into Marriage Two begins as issues from these last two levels of covenant begin to accumulate, making ignoring them in the service of bridge building more and more difficult.

Marriage Two then becomes a battlefield whose motto is, “If you’d just do this like I want to do this, we’d have a wonderful marriage!” Typically, by the time we have a “teenage marriage” (years 13-19), we also have children, who, wonderful as they are, add enormous stresses to a relationship. Surviving a “teenage marriage” is just as difficult as surviving teenage children; and if our teenage marriage coincides with actually having teenage children, things are all the more difficult.

The second decade of most marriages—remember that we’re talking about “normal” marriages—is a pretty painful journey, as marriage partners use various forms of manipulative behavior to try to strong-arm each other into submission to “the way I want our marriage to be.” We typically move through these years in increasing frustration and desperation, which not infrequently results in abandoning ship and abandoning all the good that God could have brought about through the fiery furnace of character building that enduring marriage represents.

But for those who hang on and who keep their promises to each other, however difficult—and especially for those who are wise and courageous enough to seek assistance along the way—somewhere toward the end of the second decade we begin the welcome transition into Marriage Three. That began to happen in year eighteen for Jill and me. All through that year (Nathan was sixteen and Anna was 13), Jill and I looked at each other and said out loud, “I’m SO GLAD we didn’t quit!” We said those words over and over and over to each other!

In Marriage Three, those things that were charming in Marriage One and infuriating in Marriage Two begin, ever so slightly, to be cute again. Having tried and failed in our efforts to manipulate each other into becoming someone other than who God made us to be, we begin at last to rediscover—or perhaps to discover for the first time—the wonder and the beauty of the person whom God has given us as a life partner and soul mate.

As that process continues, our children grow up and launch their lives into the larger world, leaving us alone again in an empty nest. But now, with a sense of satisfaction at a job well done, we can set our own pace again in Marriage Four until advancing age forces a slower cadence.

Marriage Four has a lot in common with the patina that develops on silver flatware over the years. New sterling is certainly beautiful and shiny, but old sterling, having experienced a good bit of wear and tear, is far more beautiful. People are a lot like that. We start life beautiful and shiny, but wear and tear over the years produces a different kind of beauty, a beauty far richer and much more Real. As I mentioned last week in another context, the wisdom of the Old Skin Horse applies here, too:

“What is REAL?” asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you’re made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. . . .”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time—that’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get

loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all because *once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.*"⁶

The title of this message comes from one of the most painful—and most crucial—moments of our own marriage (and I have Jill's permission to tell this story). Jill and I were navigating the transition from Marriage One into Marriage Two, and really were in year seven, I think. That means Nathan was five and Anna was about a year old when this happened.

In those days, I was a young pastor and Jill was a stay-at-home Mom. I don't remember all that was going on, but it was certainly painful, because on one fateful afternoon Jill took me out in the back yard, away from the children, who must have been asleep, to look me in the eye and tell me, "**The only reason I'm staying married to you—the ONLY reason I'm staying married to you—is that I said I would.**" That's called hitting the mule between the eyes with a two-by-four, and it got my attention.

I wish I could tell you that things were rosy and wonderful from that point on, but they weren't. Our Marriage Two was a painful time for all four of us, but we hung on, got into counseling, and tried to live by a maxim from my friend Ernie White, who pointed out that "**Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God intended each to be.**" That's been on our refrigerator literally for decades, and it's there right now—faded, like the Old Skin Horse, and like we ourselves have become with time.

My friends, I'm here to tell you that marriage is not all wonderful; but it IS all worth it! As a wise older woman said to Jill as we struggled our way through Marriage Two, "When you promised 'for better or for worse,' did you mean it, or did you not?" That kind of commitment is the only anchor that will hold your marriage together during the storms of life. And the only way you and I can experience such commitment is by the power of God's Holy Spirit at work within, transforming us little by little into persons who can celebrate each other with a love that becomes more and more like that with which God has loved both of us since before the creation of the world.

Just this week, in watching our *RightNow* videos on marriage, I came across another definition of love that I find to be both true and powerful. This one is by Chip Ingram: "**Love is giving another person what they need the most, when they deserve it the least, at great personal cost.**"⁷

Yes, there is pain in marriage, for sure and certain. The Good News is that most of the pain is birth pain, if we have eyes to see it. The unseen factor in the enterprise of *Christian* marriage is the work of the Spirit of God, the Midwife of Eternity, who lends us divine strength to hold fast to our commitment and gives us Hope to keep on keeping on.

When all is said and done, and when we ask ourselves what is most truly good in the world, what seems most worthwhile, what most surely turns our struggles into joy, and what brings closest a sense of harmony with the purposes of God, then surely Christian marriage must be a central part of our answer. Marriage is not the only way in which God graces the relationships in our lives—there are many, many others—but for many of us Christian marriage is the vehicle for God's most precious gifts of grace.

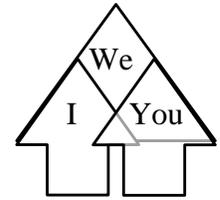
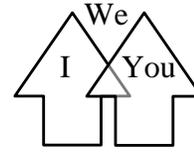
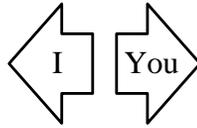
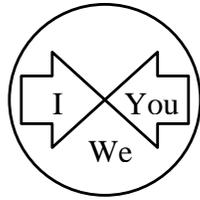
As Robert Browning penned long ago, "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be—the last of life, for which the first was made."

⁶ Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 1922.

⁷ Chip Ingram, "Breaking Down Walls," in *Marriage Built to Last*, www.rightnow.org/Media/Series/5#3

Let me say it again: **marriage is not all wonderful, but it IS all worth it.** And only those who hold fast to enduring faithfulness in their marriages will discover that it is precisely in the context of committed Christian marriage that they are most able to live out their faith in Christ . . . **“because we said we would.”**

Four Marriages within a Marriage



	Marriage One	Marriage Two	Marriage Three	Marriage Four
GOALS	Dream	Disillusionment	Discovery	Depth
COMMUNICATION	Expectation	Manipulation	Invitation	Dialogue
FEELINGS	Excuse	Explode	Express	Experience
DIFFERENCES	Accommodate	Eliminate	Appreciate	Celebrate
CONFLICT	Avoid	Attack	Adjust	Accept
INTIMACY	Dependent	Independent	Interdependent	Intimate
ROLES	Complementary	Symmetrical	Parallel	Intertwined
MEANING	Hopes	Hopelessness	Hopeful	Hope

From David Augsburger,
Sustaining Love: Healing & Growth in the Passages of Marriage
 (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25).

The Life Cycle of a Marriage

ERA OF MARRIAGE	<i>Marriage One</i>		<i>Marriage Two</i>		<i>Marriage Three</i>		<i>Marriage Four</i>
STAGE	Stage 1 (c. Years 0-4)	Stage 2 (c. Years 5-8)	Stage 3 (c. Years 9-12)	Stage 4 (c. Years 13-16)	Stage 5 (c. Years 17-20)	Stage 6 (c. Years 21-24)	Stage 7 (c. Years 25+)
MARITAL FOCUS	Initial Commitment	Provisional Commitment	Crisis of Commitment	Joint Productivity	Summing Up Life Direction	Embracing Life's Work	Celebrating Integrity
FAMILY FOCUS	Young Married Couple	Child-bearing Stage	Preschool Stage	School-age Stage	Teenage Stage	Launching Years	Middle-age Onward
GOALS	<i>Pursuing the Dream</i>		<i>Experiencing Disillusionment</i> (the Dream evaporates)		<i>Discovery of a New Dream</i>		<i>Depth</i>
SOURCES OF CONFLICT	Conflict of Loyalties (Parents vs. Mate)	Conflict over Uncertainties about Choice of Partner	Conflict over Parenting Values and Styles	Conflict over Priorities, Parenting, and Careers	Conflict over Parenting and Enduring Life Values	Conflicts over Directions and Rates of Personal Growth	Conflicts arising from Despair and Stagnation
PATTERNS OF CONFLICT	Accommodate Differences (I'll pretend we are just alike.)		Eliminate Differences (If only you were like me!)		Appreciate Differences (Well, maybe you're okay.)		Celebrate Differences (Wow!)

NOTE: This model generally presumes that couples marry in their early twenties and begin bearing children within several years thereafter. Differing patterns of marriage and family development will require appropriate modifications to the chart.

Modified from David Augsburger,
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 (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25, 32-33.