



660 Mason Ridge Center Dr.
St. Louis, Missouri 63141-8557
1-800-876-9880 • www.lhm.org
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For Better, For Worse

Maintaining a Healthy Marriage

*Based upon sermon excerpts of
Dr. Oswald Hoffmann*

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Is marriage on the way out? That question is being asked in utter seriousness by many people. They cite statistics indicating that almost more than 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. But there are hopeful signs that couples are moving back toward holding onto marriage.

Even with hopeful indicators that couples are holding on to their marriages through tough circumstances, the pressures of the world to abandon one's commitment weigh heavy.

Marriage is a demanding journey, to say the least, and the damage caused by marital problems resulting in divorce is indeed great. Damage may result even if couples stay together in the same house but live as if divorced. Such a situation encourages infidelity and other evils, often building a spirit of bitterness that poisons all of life.

Why is marriage so difficult today? Many recent developments have affected family life. People live longer now—marriages may last 50 years as opposed to 30 for our grandparents, giving couples 20 years more of learning how to live together in mutual companionship ... or mutual bitterness, as the case may be.

Other factors, including employment of both husband and wife, and troubles with children often put increasing pressure on marriages. Many marriages today simply do not warrant the description, "They lived happily ever after."

Another reason marriages falter is that people make the mistake of thinking marriage will cure everything in their life—from financial debt, to lack of love, boredom and even irresponsibility. That assumption is dangerously unrealistic!

A counselor, commenting on this attitude, said, "I cringe when I hear someone suggest to a single person whose difficulties and inadequacies stick out all over, that what he or she needs is a good wife or husband. I wonder what people have against the poor partner who will be saddled with the task of shepherding that little neurotic through life."

Perhaps the counselor's assessment was a bit gruff, but it is important to realize that marriage is not the cure for life's problems. In an era where a high percentage of marriages end in divorce, husbands and wives owe it to their partners in marriage to learn how to stay together ... for better or for worse.

What Does It Mean to Live As a Couple?

Married people today face many more problems than they thought they would have to when first going into their marriage.

Think about it! Marriage puts together two people with different likes and dislikes, different family backgrounds, different maturity levels, and various temperaments under one, sometimes tiny, roof. Financial problems put an added burden on the marital bond. When children arrive on the scene, conflicts arise over different disciplinary styles. All of these differences can cause great bitterness. Left unresolved, it can easily lead to a broken family, emotional problems, violence and sometimes one or both partners seeking attention and companionship outside the home.

Combine these problems with the knowledge that marriages often fail because either one or *both* of the partners enter into marriage without knowing what they are doing. Sometimes they are too young to grasp what marriage really is, or they may be too self-centered to give more than they receive.

Frequently, it happens that a man and woman enter into marriage with reservations—such as if the marriage doesn't work out, it's okay to divorce. Or, people want their spouses to accept them exactly as they are “warts and all,” but expect their spouse to change to suit them. If the spouse doesn't change, the partner feels justified in bailing out.

A good marriage takes unshakable determination.

What does it take to make a good marriage? A good marriage requires discernment within both people—discernment that enables them to know before marriage what marriage really is, and during marriage to help them make themselves and their marriage relationship what it should be to flourish fully.

By definition, discernment involves developing good insight and clear judgment in marriage. It is making right decisions for the right reasons.

As you will see in the coming pages, there is a divine blueprint for your marriage. Whether you will be able to build your marriage on this blueprint depends upon what kind of man or woman you are. What kind of man or woman you are depends to a great extent upon your relationship with God. He knows the real you and your ability or inability to practice discernment to resist temptations that can break up a family.

What Makes a Happy Marriage?

A good marriage is satisfying and lasting. It can, and should, improve each passing year. It is a part of God's plan for the world. It is not only human, but divine. Yet even though divine, marriage takes effort. Marriage is holding on for better or worse. People married for a long time will tell you a good marriage takes unshakable determination.

Four Principles of a Good Marriage

Principle 1: Marriage calls for a new focus: not on father or mother, siblings or friends, but on your partner. In marriage, two lives become one. Husbands and wives can and should give themselves completely to each other—physically, emotionally and spiritually. That's what St. Paul meant when he said, “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Ephesians 5:21). If your relationship is just physical, it probably won't last—although many people don't want to hear that. They want to be satisfied physically, but they don't want to satisfy their partner emotionally or spiritually.

Principle 2: Marriage requires trust. Without trust a marriage goes to pieces. It takes a long time to rebuild trust once it has been destroyed. Guard against breaking the trust of your spouse in big things as well as in “little white lies.” Gird yourself with prayer and disciplined obedience against sinful temptations (sexual immorality and adultery, addictions, overspending,

etc.), which can destroy the trust your spouse has in you. If a temptation seems overwhelming, seek help from your pastor or trained counselor immediately. Make a conscious effort to recommit yourself to your marriage vows.

Principle 3: A good marriage requires love beyond the superficial thing that so many people call love today. It is not just an attraction or the ability to live together without destroying each other. It is love as Christ had when He gave Himself up for the world, without any real thought about Himself. God is love, and reverence for Him recognizes the essence of what real love should be in marriage.

The love of Jesus caused Him to put Himself in our place. He died for us and took our sins upon Himself so that with faith in Him we might stand in the presence of God—forgiven and loved. That’s true love. It’s the basic principle of marriage. Anything else is pure imitation.

With forgiveness, any marriage can become a good marriage.

Principle 4: Marriage takes forgiveness. Forgiveness is often difficult because by its very definition it acknowledges that someone did something very real and very wrong that resulted in real pain and disappointment for the other person. Yet, that is exactly why forgiveness is essential. It helps couples get past the pain and disappointments that are blocking the healing in their relationship.

Without forgiveness, a good marriage is impossible. With it, any marriage can become a good marriage. Ask God to help you forgive your spouse, and ask your spouse to forgive you for past hurts today. Christ willingly died to forgive a multitude of truly unforgivable sins. How can we refuse to forgive the person we promised to love and cherish for a lifetime? Harboring an unforgiving spirit in marriage can only harm the relationship and cause ugly bitterness in personal life. Please note one important caveat: if you or your spouse is abusive (physically or sexually), or if either partner is mentally disturbed, exhibits addictive or bizarre behavior, or any other serious problems, these concerns require immediate treatment and professional counseling. Also, if you or your children are in danger from your spouse, seek safe haven as soon as possible. These problems must be addressed first. Left untended, they will probably make rebuilding your marriage impossible.

Besides these four tried-and-true principles, there are other practical ideas that can improve your marriage.

Some Practical Recommendations

1. Establish communication; love does not make your mate a mind-reader. Love requires mutual trust to be able to communicate honestly and openly. Talk to a counselor or find materials to help you build your communication skills together.
2. Begin a plan aimed at forgiving each other, first with words and later with concrete actions. Don’t just ask for forgiveness; show by your behavior that you are truly sorry and truly forgiving.
3. Re-examine the hopes and dreams that united you originally. It is not good to reject the foundation built earlier, even if it was weak.

Pray to God for wisdom and patience in your marriage.

4. Count the benefits that as a couple you both enjoy; it is important to focus on the positive first, and then, little by little, analyze and resolve the negative.
5. Never be afraid to seek the help of a counselor and, better yet, a counselor who is a Christian.
6. Recognize the need to return to the Author of life, the Creator, in order to know His guidance and words of encouragement. If you have not done so already, begin reading the Bible and pray to God for wisdom and patience in your marriage.

In a good marriage, there are certain things that a loving couple will do, and the sooner these become habits, the better.

- They will pray for one another.
- They will take care of one another.
- They will suffer with one another.
- They will get help from a trained counselor or spiritual leader when help is needed.

It takes hard work to make a good marriage.

- They will not go around spreading stories about their partner or compare him or her to others unfavorably.
- They will have confidence that when things go wrong they can be put right. They won't threaten divorce.
- They will talk to each other and listen.
- They will treat each other with respect and apologize, making amends, when they don't.
- They will not be domineering, abusive, temperamental, manipulative, insensitive or irresponsible.
- They will apologize when they are wrong or when they have let their spouse down.
- They will, as St. Paul said, *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."*

It takes hard work to make a good marriage and a real commitment from both parties. It takes action and thoughtfulness. It also takes words like "I love you." It is not healthy to be like the man who told his wife why he never said he loved her: "I said when we were married. If that changes, I'll let you know."

Christ Himself shows us about love, forgiving and giving in His dealings with His 12 apostles. Even when Peter denied Him three times, Jesus forgave him completely and later blessed Peter with the opportunity to witness for Him to the world. That kind of living and giving is the opposite of what we hear about these days. It is the opposite of insisting on one's own rights.

Why Marriage?

It was God's idea that the relationship between man and woman should be marriage. Many people who have tried living together without the benefit of marriage will tell you it is not the same because there isn't a real commitment. Perhaps that is why statistically people who lived together before marriage are more likely to divorce than those who didn't.

Marriage is a process of growing together in love, loyalty and understanding.

God created us with a need for human companionship. He said, *"It is not good that man should be alone."* (see Genesis 2:18). Marriage is not the only way to meet that need, but it is a mighty good way. God made us sexual beings so that we could complement each other in life together. Probably no one appreciates that more than a spouse who has just lost a partner in marriage, only to find the spouse is missed much more than he or she ever expected.

There is no other institution that has greater potential for satisfying the need for companionship than marriage. This is because it is uniquely intimate. Generally in marriage, husband and wife become more and more married as time goes on. A couple celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary is more married than the day they wed. That is because marriage is much more than a legal contract. It's a process of growing together in love, loyalty and understanding. It's something to work at "till death do you part."

It's important to remember that marriages change as people change. Often people are disillusioned when their marriage is no longer in the "honeymoon phase."

Yet, if people are always seeking rockets and romance, they may miss the God-ordained blessing of a comfortable, companionable relationship with a spouse who is both friend and lover.

Sexual intimacy in marriage is a wonderful way to honor God through an experience that can be enjoyed in harmony with His holy ideals for the couple.

Couples need to accept this sexual impulse as a dynamic and special creation of God. Receive it with gratitude. It was designed to enrich your life. The sexual act, according to the Creator, is a means of unique communication between married partners, just as it is of procreation. The message of marriage is "I want to be united to you by a faithful and everlasting love. Our sexual celebration is a wonderful occasion to share that love with each other."

Most married people will tell you they are glad their marriage did not stay where it was on their honeymoon. They know each other and understand each other better now, have better sexual relations, and love each other more deeply. That is what God intended for marriage and why He wants you to have that joy in your relationship.

To have that kind of relationship in its fullness, it is essential that you have a right relationship with God—the Creator of all things—including your marriage.

Do you know Him as your Lord and Savior? If not, ask Him to come into your heart today. Admit the sins you have committed and the mistakes you have made both in your life and in your marriage. Seek His forgiveness. Forgiveness makes a marriage just as it makes a life!

Ask God for the sake of Christ to restore your marriage. Let Him be Lord over your family. Remember, even though God in Christ Jesus has restored your relationship with Him, problems will still occur. There will always be problems between people because people are different! This is not the problem. It is the inability to resolve differences that is the problem. Differences must be resolved in positive ways before they cause more serious damage.

Now, to answer the question asked on the first page, "Is marriage on the way out?" The answer is a resounding NO! How about your life? Is your marriage on the way out? Trust God that He will restore and renew you with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, so you can answer that question too with a resounding NO!

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Remember this: "*Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate*" (Mark 10:9).

Notes

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