

**Title: Marriage that Works**  
**Text: Various verses from Proverbs**  
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One of the best parts of my role as a Pastor is the privilege I have in presiding at weddings. I am a hopeless romantic – I love everything about the whole wedding deal – especially the exuberant joy and hope that is at the heart of it.

For those of us who are married, I wonder if we can remember the moment we walked down the aisle, or watched as our bride floated towards us? Last year I stumbled across a YouTube clip of a wedding march that demonstrates the unrestrained joy that is at the heart of weddings:

### **Play Wedding March Clip**

As much as we love weddings, marriage itself is a long-standing tradition and foundation of society that is under threat.

Less people are being bothered with getting married and the marriage rate in Australia has dropped consistently for years.

80% of couples that do marry live together before doing so.

30% of marriages will end in divorce.

With these sort of facts it would be easy to think, 'Why bother?'

Such cynicism about marriage is typified by Woody Allen when he says:

There are three rings involved with marriage. The engagement ring, the wedding ring, and the suffering.  
(Woody Allen)

It will come as no surprise to you when I say that marriage is not an anachronism, that it is not a passing fashion that has had its day. Marriage is part of the bedrock of a secure society. Marriage is God's idea, one of God's best ideas, and was instituted by God right at the dawn of creation.

But marriage can also be hard work. I will often offer this quote at weddings I preside at:

A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day.  
(Andre Maurois)

How then do you build a successful marriage, one that stands the test to time – a marriage that works? To answer this question I want to name five pillars of a successful marriage we find in the Book of Proverbs. Let's jump in:

### **The first pillar of a marriage that works is to Choose Carefully**

Today we have the freedom to choose our life-partner. It is one of the biggest, of not the biggest decision we will make. It follows that we should choose carefully. The consequences of doing otherwise can be dire.

In the midst of a raging argument, a man said to his wife, "I don't know how you can be so stupid and so beautiful all at the same time."

The wife responded, "Allow me to explain. God made me beautiful so you would be attracted to me; God made me stupid so I would be attracted to you!"

Recognising this decision is so important, what attributes should we look for in our marriage partner? Proverbs states that:

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband entrusts his heart to her, and he lacks nothing of value.

(Proverbs 31:10-11)

Before we go on, let me say that the book of Proverbs is a collection of ancient wisdom written by men, primarily for men. Proverbs is a father teaching his sons the wisdom he has won over the years.

In Proverbs is a lot of wisdom on marriage and relationships. But just because it is written by men for men does not mean this advice is not relevant to women. Far from it; as I hope we shall see. For example, this Proverb can be read equally:

A husband of noble character who can find? He is worth far more than diamonds.

The uncommon wisdom of Proverbs suggests that a person's character is the most important attribute to look for in our marriage partner; not beauty, social status, earning potential or even family background – but character. More than that, Proverbs suggests noble character is what we should seek in our partner.

The words translated as noble is the Hebrew word hayil, which means strength and power, warrior. A man or woman with noble character will fight for his or her family, will sacrifice for her or his partner and will do whatever it takes to protect those closest to them.

There are many things that attracted me to Sue, not least of which is she is smoking hot beautiful. But what convinced me to marry her is her character. She is a woman of noble character. She says what she thinks, holds firm to her beliefs, would do anything for me or the kids and is not easily swayed. She fights for what is right. She is a warrior woman!

A husband or wife of such character is more precious than rubies or gold. And to such a person you can entrust the most precious possession you have – your heart. With such a person you can risk being vulnerable - you can take off your masks and let down your defences.

Choosing carefully is the first pillar of a marriage that works.

Some of us may be thinking, well I made my choice and I'm not sure it was a good one. (Here is a tip, don't look at your husband or wife right now!)

You don't see or experience the noble character Proverbs talk about in my partner. Perhaps rather than lamenting what your partner may or may not have, a better way may be to ask yourself how you might help develop that sort of character in them – the character you long for. How might you help form strength and wisdom and steadfastness in your wife or husband? Do you pray, asking that God might change them and you so that you both become more fully the people God created you to be?

### **The second pillar of a successful marriage that I draw from Proverbs is Communicate Clearly**

Perhaps the most popular self-help book on marriage and relationships is a book called 'Men are from Mars, Women are from....Venus.' The title tells us what we all know; while men and women are similar in so many ways, in others it feels like we are completely different species. No more is this the case in the way we tend to communicate.

George Bernard Shaw has said:

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.  
(George Bernard Shaw)

After 22 years I still get surprised when Sue fails to understand what I have said when I know I could not have been clearer.

This week I read 17 things that men wished women knew about them. I want to list 7 that relate directly to the issue of communication:

1. If you ask a question you don't really want an answer to, expect an answer you didn't want to hear.
2. Ask for what you want. Let's be clear on this one: Subtle hints don't work. Strong hints don't work. Really obvious hints don't work. Just say it!
3. Yes and no are perfectly acceptable answers to almost every question.
4. Come to us with a problem only if you want help solving it. That's what we do. Sympathy is what your girlfriends are for.
5. Anything we said six months ago is inadmissible in an argument. All comments become null and void after seven days.
6. Whenever possible, please say whatever you have to say during commercials.
7. If we ask what's wrong and you say "nothing," we will act like nothing's wrong. We know you're lying, but it's just not worth the hassle.

And to be fair, here are seven communication tips from women for men.

1. Don't ever lie to us; we always find out.
2. If you're in a bad mood, we're going to assume it's our fault. So, tell us what's bothering you.
3. Yes, it's true. Sometimes we like to call up and talk about nothing. Get used to it.
4. If you ask us what's wrong and we say nothing, ask us again. And this time, look sincere.
5. When we say something, it's necessary for you to respond. At the very minimum, nod your head.
6. If you only knew how much a tender word, a thoughtful act, an unexpected gift means to us, you would do it, and your life would improve exponentially.
7. When no one's home, stand in front of a mirror and practice this until you can say it in public, "I was wrong."

At the root of many marital difficulties is a failure to communicate adequately. This failure leads to enormous frustration, misunderstanding, pain and misery. The writer of Proverbs says:

Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.  
(Proverbs 21:19)

The word translated as desert is the Hebrew word midbar, which specifically refers to the wilderness region between Israel and Egypt. It is a bleak and desolate place. And so it is in a marriage where communication has broken down in acrimony.

Of course another way of putting this verse could be:

Better to live in Antarctica than with a grumpy, incommunicative husband.  
(Stu Cameron Paraphrase)

It is not just what we say that can cause conflict in a marriage; it is what we don't say. Some of us say too much, at other times we don't say enough – and it causes all sorts of drama.

For example, have you ever had a fight fought with silence?

A married couple had a fight and ended up giving each other the silent treatment. A week into their mute argument, the man realized he needed his wife's help. In order to catch a flight for work, he had to get up at 5 a.m.

Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me at 5 a.m." The next morning the man woke up only to discover his wife was already out of bed, it was 9 a.m., and his flight had long since departed. He was about to find his wife and demand an answer for her failings when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed.

He read, "It's 5 a.m. Wake up."

On New Year's Eve Sue and I celebrated our 22<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary. We have been married exactly half our life. Amazing! Our marriage has been a wonderful adventure, and it is not over yet. I'd like to be able to say that after 22 years I know all there is to know about Sue and how best to communicate with her, but the truth is I am still learning.

In fact, one of the things I am committed to is to being a student of my wife. I want to learn all there is to know about her, and in turn how best to communicate with her and most especially, love her.

After 22 years I think I have graduated with a bachelor's degree. I am working on my graduate diploma. One day I may well have my masters. My goal is that by the end of my life I will have a PhD in all things Sue; that I will be an expert in all that she is.

This I know already, quite apart from our gender based differences, Sue and I epitomise the saying that opposites attract. I am an extrovert, she is more introverted; I am a big picture person, she pays attention to the details; I feel first, she thinks first – and so on. In our differences are so many opportunities for conflict, but also so many opportunities for growth.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy said:

What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility.  
(Leo Tolstoy)

And so I am learning to better communicate; to think before I speak and to listen before I respond.

Proverbs says:

The tongue has the power of life and death.  
(Proverbs 18:21a)

No more is this the case than in marriage. Clear, honest and loving communication is vital to a thriving marriage:

Apples of gold in a silver setting is a word spoken in its right timing.  
(Proverbs 25:11)

Communication is critical to a marriage that works and so too is romance.

### **In a thriving marriage you will Romance Joyfully**

The Bible has an undeserved reputation for being indirect and hard to understand. More often than not it is all pretty plain. For example, Proverbs says, and let's read together:

May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.  
(Proverbs 5:18-19)

Just in case you do not get the imagery, the fountain here refers to male ejaculation, and breasts refers to, well, breasts.

The writer is advising young and old men everywhere, 'Spend all your sexual energy on your wife and become light headed with love. Be inebriated by your wife's love – may her breasts intoxicate you all the time'

Get married and get it on!

For the girls, may your husband's six-pack make you swoon. Hard to imagine for some of us I know!

Let me be clear; the Bible is not anti-sex. Far from it, the Bible tells us that sexual pleasure is one of God's great gifts to us that should be celebrated within the boundaries of marriage.

The bible teaches me that in marriage we should creatively explore the gift of erotic love. We should seek to pleasure our husband or wife in as many creative ways as possible.

One of the best investments I make in my marriage to Sue is to romance her. Just because we've been married for 22 years does not mean I should stop wooing her; or her me. I still buy flowers, tell her I love her dozens of times a day, write her letters, send her texts and basically act the romantic fool. And she really, really likes it.

As I have shared with you before, we love embarrassing my teenage kids by being affectionate towards one another. One of them said to us last year as we were having a kiss and a cuddle, 'Take it upstairs will you!' As much as they may be embarrassed every now and then, Joel and Emily know we love each other more deeply now than even our wedding day.

Romance, including expressing sexual love, should be pursued as long as we are physically able. Some of us who are married may well be thinking, 'Well the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!' The facts are we do get older and our energy levels, including our sexual energy does diminish. We may face other physical limitations. But even this should not stop us from expressing loving intimacy to our wife or husband – a cuddle stolen, a hand squeezed, a lingering kiss...

Some years ago a magazine asked readers to submit ways in which they have seen romance flourish in marriage. This letter was received. I love it:

Dear Ann,

Last weekend, we celebrated my parent's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. This morning, they left on a long-awaited trip to Hawaii. They were as excited as if it were their honeymoon. You see, when my parents married, they had only enough money for a three-day trip, 50 miles from home, and they made a pact that each time they made love, they would put a dollar in a special metal box, and they would save it for a honeymoon in Hawaii for their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Dad was a policeman and mum was a schoolteacher, and raising five children was a challenge, and sometimes money was short. But no matter what emergency came up, Dad would not let mum take any money out of the Hawaii account.

My parents were always very much in love. I can remember Dad coming home and telling mum, 'I have a dollar in my pocket.' And she would smile at him and reply, 'I know just how to spend it.' And when each of us children married, Mum and Dad gave us each a small metal box, and they told us their secret, which we found inspiring.

Mum and dad never told us how much money they managed to save, but it must have been very considerable, because when they withdrew their money from a special savings account, they had enough money for airfares to Hawaii, hotel accommodation for ten days and plenty of spending money.

Before they boarded the plane, Dad took us kids aside, winked at us and said, 'Tonight we're starting an account for Mexico!'

I love it! We have a bunch of tin boxes available out in the courtyard after the service. You may want to take one...

### **The fourth pillar of a marriage that works is that we must Guard Jealously**

The sin of adultery wrecks marriages. Having sex with someone other than our marriage partner is a breach of trust that is very difficult to recover from. Proverbs states:

Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.  
(Proverbs 6:27-29)

We must guard jealously the marriage vows we have made, the covenant we have entered into with our wife or husband and with God. We must be vigilant as every marriage is vulnerable. You don't have to have an unhappy marriage to be susceptible. Recently researchers at Duke University identified that the majority of married people who had adulterous affairs said they also had happy marriages.

Christian marriage is a covenant relationship we enter into with our husband or wife and with God. A strong and faithful marriage will always welcome God's presence.

Years ago a TV talk show host interviewed a young boy. The young man was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine.

As the host questioned the boy, it became apparent the boy was very religious. The host asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?"

"Last week," came his reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The host asked, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

Now that is great advice; if you want a great marriage, a marriage that works invite Jesus into it and with his help, guard jealously the commitments you have made.

There are some practical ways that we can jealously guard our marriage. For example, I highly commend Making Marriage Better, one of our Lifekeys courses as one of the best investments you can make in your relationship. Also, most couples at some point in their journey can benefit from counselling. Six years ago I was having some real struggles in my life for which I received counselling over a six month period. As part of that process Sue and I met with my counsellor together, recognising that my problems were affecting our relationship.

Doing marriage courses, getting Christian counselling is not a sign of weakness; it is more often an expression of strength – it says that you are prepared to fight for your marriage.

**Choose carefully, communicate clearly, romance joyfully and guard jealously; and the last pillar of a marriage that works is Rejoice Continuously.**

Proverbs says that:

He who finds a good wife finds what is good and receives favour from the Lord.  
(Proverbs 18:22)

A good wife or husband is a divine gift. Marriage is one of God's best ideas, one of God's greatest gifts to us.

22 years ago Sue and I got married – half a life time. Here is a picture. How young were we? How skinny was I?

Here is a picture of us almost 22 years later. What do I see in this picture? I see that I have gained more chins than I once had. I also see that Sue's hair has somehow, and for some reason miraculously changed colour. But I also see this.

I see a woman I love more deeply and completely than the day we married, and who I know loves me the same way.

I see a couple that have had ups and downs and who have failed each other in large and small ways.

I see a couple that experience joy in the present and look to the future with hope and expectation.

Above all, I see a couple that have been blessed by God, not because of anything good in them, but simply blessed out of God grace – out of God's favour.

A marriage that works is one that is lived with a sense of gratitude to the God whose good idea it was in the first place.