

## IS MARRIAGE EVER HOPELESS?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 26, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Is marriage ever hopeless? Sometimes, over the years when I have been called to counsel with couples who were having marital problems, I have thought so. Sometimes the marriage has been established on so shaky a foundation that I could see no way for it to last. One such marriage was that of an unusually talented, highly trained young woman with a young man who had far less ability and far less training. Their backgrounds were so different, their courtship so brief, and their personalities so contrasting that I did not feel there was much hope for the permanence of the marriage. Or, sometimes the animosities between husband and wife have been so deep and the estrangement so complete that I have felt there was no hope,

Even on these occasions, however, when I have felt little hope for the marriage, I have still tried to help the couple work out their problems. In view of God's teachings I have not wanted to encourage or contribute to the break up of a home, even in the slightest way. Surely there are enough influences against the home without the counselor adding a negative force.

### Marriages Which Seem Hopeless

Over the years as I have tried to analyze situations in which marriages seem hopeless, I have come to the conclusion that they often fall into one or another of three distinct categories. First, marriages tend to appear hopeless, so far as their permanence is concerned, when there is no knowledge of or commitment to the teachings of God concerning marriage. When the pressures of life come on, unless there is a knowledge of God's will and a loyalty to that will, marriages often break up. It is for that reason that I think it good for us to pause for a few moments to consider the teachings of God's word concerning marriage.

In the very beginning of the Bible God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." (Gen. 2:18). Then God proceeded to form woman and to bring her to man as a suitable companion. At this point Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." (Gen. 2:23-24). This was God's original plan for the happiness and good of mankind. One woman for one man for life is a very simple and a very satisfying formula even yet.

Later in the Old Testament the words of Solomon encourage us to "Live joyously with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life ..." (Eccl. 9:9). From the same wise man came the words, "A worthy woman who can find? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband trusteth in her. And he shall have no lack of gain. She doeth him good and not evil all the days of her life." (Prov. 31:10-12). In the Old Testament book of Ruth there is a remarkable statement from Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi. I would like to borrow this statement originally suggesting this monumental love of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law to suggest that it contains the essence of the relationship that the scriptures intend for husband and wife. The sentence goes, "Entreat me not to leave thee, nor to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." (Ruth 1:16-17).

In the New Testament, Jesus included in his great Sermon on the Mount the admonition, "Ye have heard that it was said ... Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, that everyone that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress: and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery." (Matt. 5:27, 31-32). The same message is found in the 19th chapter of Matthew, where Christ recognized that at certain times in the Old Testament period people were allowed to put away their wives, but then added, "... from the beginning it hath not been so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." (Matt. 19:8-9).

The apostle Paul presents one of the most beautiful tributes to marriage, as he draws an analogy between the relationship between husband and wife and that of Christ and the church. Paul wrote, "Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the Savior of the body ... Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it ... Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife loveth himself ... For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh." (Eph. 5:22-23, 25, 28, 30).

Again, my reason for wanting to read this somewhat extended series of scriptures presenting the Biblical picture of marriage is that I have observed through the years that those marriages in which either husband or wife or both are ignorant of the teachings of God, or are uncommitted to live by those teachings, often result in marriages which have little hope of survival. A knowledge of these guidelines from God and a commitment to live by them is the strongest foundation that a marriage can have.

## No Determination

The second situation in which marriages appear to be hopeless is when there is no determination on the part of husband or wife, or both, to make the marriage work. Sometimes I have counseled with couples who seemingly had no real desire for their marriage to succeed. I remember particularly a relatively young husband whom I would describe as weak, indulgent, selfish, lazy and unfaithful to his wife. He would not earn a living, but wasted his days with his cronies. He indulged his every desire, often coming home in the wee hours of the morning. Openly he let it be known, both to his wife and to others, that he had no real concern whether his marriage continued or not. This marriage obviously had little hope of succeeding.

At the beginning of this message I mentioned a marriage in which there was a great gulf in talent, training, and temperament between a young wife and a young husband. I saw no real hope for that marriage to survive, yet more than a score of years have passed and the marriage continues and gives every impression of being at least a reasonably good marriage. I can explain the success of this marriage only in terms of the very strong determination on the part of the wife that this marriage would work. She has put all her talent and training behind her determination that this marriage will succeed. I am convinced that whenever one of the marriage partners is deeply determined that the marriage will survive it often does survive.

The third situation in which I have felt that marriages have the appearance of being hopeless is when living conditions, work situation, intimate friends and in-laws constitute a strongly negative environment. Sometimes I have felt that a marriage exists in an almost totally hostile environment, with every influence seemingly determined to cause the marriage to fail. In such situations a move is imperative. A fresh start in a new environment will often help and may even make the difference whether the marriage survives or not.

Not long ago a very young husband talked with me by phone, preferring not even to give me his name. He explained that his wife, who was even younger than himself, was working downtown in a department store. Working in the same department was a young man who had no religious or moral scruples about taking another man's wife from him. This predator by his smooth manner and appealing appearance had almost won the young husband's wife away from him. This surely was a case where drastic steps needed to be taken and at once. When the environment in which a couple lives and the people with whom they associate form a strongly negative influence on their marriage, it is time to move.

What about these and other marriages like them? Are they really hopeless? We have a number of proverbs or adages in our language which often contain a great deal of meaning. For example, one says, "Where there is a will, there is a way." Another says, "While there is life, there is hope." I believe in both of these statements. I also believe that they may well be applied to marriages that are in difficulty. I would also add the apostle Paul's statement, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:13). If either the husband or the wife is a Christian, and if he or she will work diligently and pray fervently for the survival of the marriage, I believe that the Lord will help to find the way for that marriage to succeed.

## Man's Capacity To Be Transformed

My one major reason for believing that even those marriages that appear to be hopeless may not be hopeless in reality is man's great capacity to be transformed. This is essentially what Christianity is all about. Christ came that he might lift men from their hopeless involvement in sin to live on a higher plane and ultimately to live again with God. Again and again we read in the New Testament about men being transformed and becoming new creatures. For example, to the Romans Paul wrote, "And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Rom. 12:2). To the Corinthians Paul wrote, "Wherefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new." (II Cor. 5:17). To the Colossians Paul wrote, "... seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man ..." (Col. 3:9-10). In his Roman letter Paul compared the burial and resurrection involved in baptism to Christ's burial and resurrection, giving as the reason for our need to be baptized, "... so we also might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:4). Through the years I have known many men and women whose lives have been transformed from a lower to a higher plane as they have come to know Christ and his way of life,

## Specific Transformations

What are some of the specific transformations needed in marriages which seem hopeless? Let me name three. The first need is to develop maturity. Harry A. Overstreet, in his book, *The Mature Mind*, has said, "The human being is born self-centered ... One of the most important phases of maturing is that of growth from self-centering to an understanding of a relationship with others ... A person is not mature until he has both an ability and a willingness to see himself as one among others."

John A. Redhead, in his book, *How Can I Learn To Grow Up?*, has said, "Much of the unhappiness which we encounter as individuals and as families stems from a failure of some adults to grow up. Time and again some wife who has come to talk about trouble in her marriage sums up the case by saying, 'My husband is still a child in so many ways.'" Of course, it is sometimes the wife who is still just a child. This reminds us of the apostle Paul's statement in I Cor. 13:11, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child; now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things." This certainly ought to be the goal toward which each one of us strives.

Maturing involves, as I have analyzed it, four things: (1) A willingness to discuss problems openly and objectively. Judge Mildred Lillie wrote, "Most divorces are due simply to the inability of two people to sit down together and discuss their problems objectively. If you can just move them to do that, it is often the solution."

Now, the second factor involved in maturing, (2) A willingness to seek advise and help. (3) A willingness to accept responsibility. (4) A willingness to discipline oneself. Again, I would quote from Dr. Redhead, "Here then is your task: as men and women we are to grow up into real maturity as integrated responsible, expanding persons. We have at hand in our Christian faith the answer to our need, for we grow up best when we grow up into Christ."

### Conquering Pride

The second transformation that is needed in marriages which seem hopeless is the conquering of pride. There needs to be a willingness on the part of both husband and wife to say, "I'm sorry ... This was my fault ... I was wrong." This is exactly the kind of thing that James spoke of in the scriptures, "Confess therefore your sins one to another ... and pray one for another ..." (James 5:16). What a different climate there is in a marriage when there is the willingness to admit fault rather than accusing and blaming the other. There needs to be a willingness to admit weaknesses, whatever they are, whether addiction to drink, or a tendency toward overspending, or bad temper, or whatever. Then, there needs to be a willingness to seek help. This swallowing of one's pride opens the door to marital success.

A third transformation needed in marriages which seem hopeless is the ability to grow spiritually. Solid Christian character is the best possible foundation upon which marriage can be established. Divorce is almost unknown where both the husband and wife are faithful Christians. If one were looking for a husband, or a wife, what better person could one seek than one who has, as the apostle Paul puts it, "... the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control ..."? (Gal. 5:22-23). A young man or woman with these qualities will be a good marriage risk. There is nothing quite so favorable to a happy and permanent marriage as solid, Christian character.

### Conclusion

Are marriages ever hopeless? No. Not really, if Christ is given a chance. You can do nothing greater for your marriage than to become and be a genuine Christian. However, it is not just because it will mean a happier, more permanent marriage, that I would call you to follow Christ. It is because every relationship of your life will be a better relationship, when you are a Christian. It is because you will be happier and a better adjusted person when you are a Christian. It is because you will be of greater service to your fellowman and a finer asset to the world, when you are a Christian. Then, too, it is because you will then have the hope of an eternal life with God in heaven, when you are a Christian. For all these reasons, will you seriously consider accepting Christ's invitation now?