

FRAMEWORK FOR MARRIAGE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 13, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

As our population nears the 200 million mark, the number of homes in America is now approaching the fifty million mark. This is quite an impressive figure, when we think of the potential of fifty million homes. We are also impressed when we realize that there are several million new husbands and new wives each year. Sadly, we also remember that for each four million marriages, there are one million divorces. In addition, there are many marriages which do not break up yet are far from happy. Both those marriages which end in divorce and those which continue to smolder as they are fed by powerful negative destructive emotions leave their blight on thousands of lives.

We find ourselves asking the question, "What can we do to help young people know how to marry successfully?" It is obvious that much careful thought and much painstaking preparation should precede the wedding march. Before two young people walk down the aisle in marriage there are certain basic attitudes which need to be firmly established. Twenty times this year I have been given the opportunity of assisting a young couple in marriage. I consider each of these occasions both a great honor and a grave responsibility. With only an occasional exception, when circumstances do not permit, I have arranged to talk seriously with the couple prior to the marriage concerning the attitudes and ideals which they must bring to the marriage altar. I would like to mention at least some of these pre-marital suggestions now.

The Meaning of Real Love

Sometimes a young person comes to marriage without any real love for the person whom he is marrying. It may be that he is simply in love with love itself. It may be possible that he is running away from an unsatisfactory home environment, and any kind of marriage is appealing. This is more likely to occur, however, in the case of a young woman than in that of a young man. Yet again, it may be that the young person is in love with himself. In his life there are certain needs--a desire for companionship, or a need for some of the mundane necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter, or pressing biological needs. In any case, a young man or a young woman may be entering into marriage in order to satisfy his or her felt needs. If this is the motive, then it is more self-love than love for the marriage partner. This self-centered, selfish kind of love is far from the kind of love which marriage requires, if it is to be happy and successful.

Actually, there are two kinds of love in marriage. First, there is physical attraction. In marriage the experience of living together as husband and wife is right and proper, beautiful and holy. It is of God. Outside of marriage such relationship is cheap and ugly. In this day when we are told that there is a great increase in pre-marital sexual experience we are grieved because we realize that this destroys the sacred, wonderful experience that God intends for marriage partners to know. This random, illicit sex experience which the young are tempted to try not only does not provide much meaningful satisfaction, but it also destroys the real joys that God intends for them to know in the proper place and at the proper time. Such early experiences leave a young person with regrets, with doubts about himself and his companion, and with an early burned-out feeling that often leads to frustration and to psychological and physical deterioration. On the other hand, sex experience within marriage brings two lives very close together and makes them, as the scriptures suggest, one.

The scriptures have often been more frank than we in discussing such matters. Such is the case in I Cor. 7:2-6, where the apostle Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to say, "Because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. I say this by way of concession, not of command."

The second kind of love is a genuine concern for the marriage partner's good. Real love desires the best for the other person. I find myself, therefore, saying in a marriage conference, "John, except for your relationship to God, your greatest concern must now be to make Mary's life as rich and full and meaningful and happy as possible. Mary, except for your relationship to God, your greatest concern must now be to make John's life as rich and full and meaningful and happy as possible."

This principle often appears in the scriptures, as when Christ preached in the Sermon on the Mount, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12). We would restate the principle by saying, "Whatever you wish your wife should do for you, do it first for her." Another scripture that suggests something of this attitude is Gal. 3:2, which says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Perhaps the finest description of ideal love, however, is that found from the pen of the apostle Paul in I Cor. 13:4-8, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

A Leader Necessary

In every situation where two people work together it is wise to designate one as leader. Many years ago Dean Ray K. Immel, one of my favorite teachers at the University of Southern California, made this observation in one of his classes, "If you hire two carpenters to build so simple a thing as a garage, you had better make one of them foreman." In his infinite wisdom God arranged a permanent and universal means of determining the head of the multiplied millions of homes that would be established down through history. In Eph. 5:22, the apostle Paul wrote, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands." This might be oppressive and offensive if it were not for the sentence which follows, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church ... Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

Even in his physical creation of man God seemed to anticipate the role which he laid upon man's shoulders. God made him a little taller, a little larger, and a little stronger, on the average, than his marriage partner. Even our own customs have respected this principle as we have traditionally felt that the husband ought, ideally be a year or two or three older than his wife. For a committee to function it must have a chairman; for an organization to make progress it needs a head; for the home to function properly there must be this delegation of authority. Yet, realizing that this authority might become dictatorial and burdensome, God with his infinite wisdom placed such restrictions upon it that it can only be a blessing to the wife, if the husband seriously respects the Lord's directives. He must love his wife with the same love which Christ had for the church, which takes all of the sting out of his being the head of the family.

Prime Loyalty

In marriage there is also a prime loyalty. In Gen. 2:23-24, we read, "Then the man said, This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." In marriage, each of the partners reserves his highest loyalty for the other. This new loyalty supercedes even the loyalty to parents, to brothers or sisters, or to friends, no matter how strong those loyalties may have been.

The newly established home needs to be given the benefit of privacy, with the new couple living with neither set of parents. Particularly in the earliest period of adjustment do they need to be alone in order that close proximity with other family members may not hinder the growth of this new first loyalty which is so important to the success of the home. This loyalty suggests that when the husband is away with his friends he does not speak of his wife's faults, though it is inevitable that she may have faults. Likewise, when the wife is alone with her friends, she does not parade her husband's weaknesses, though it is inevitable that he also may have weaknesses. They love each other too much to talk behind each other's back. This also means that when they are in public company, they do not make jests half in humor and half in deep seriousness at the expense of the other. Again, they love each other too much.

Discuss Your Differences

In the home it is inevitable that differences of judgment will arise. When they do arise they should not be debated, but discussed. In debate the affirmative states a position and the negative then attacks the position. In issue, then, separates the two protagonists and the battle rages until one has overwhelmed the other. In discussion, on the other hand, husband and wife stand side by side and together face a problem that must be decided. Each adds whatever information of a factual nature and whatever insights he may possess to help in the discussion. Each profits by the contributions of the other, until finally a mutually acceptable solution is found. These open, frank discussions actually draw a couple closer together, rather than divide them. Sometimes, however, an issue is of such magnitude that it is not possible for husband and wife to agree immediately. Then there needs to be the passing of time with further thought on other days until a united decision can be made. This is a time when prayer can also be of great benefit. Each, loving the other, genuinely desires to reach a solution that will be pleasing to the other.

Seek Advice

Although there seems to be an innate tendency on the part of most of us to wish to ask help from others, it is generally wise to do so. The wise person realizes that he himself is not infallible and that he does not possess all truth, therefore he seeks the advice of competent specialists when he faces any major decision. Take for example the medical realm. Before marriage it is wise for a young person to go to his family doctor and say something like this, "Doctor, I am getting married shortly and I would like for you to tell me what I need to know in order to be a good husband." The wife also can profit greatly by a similar request to her doctor. Through the married years it is also wise for a person to consult his or her doctor regularly and especially when some health problem arises. This will prevent many of the problems that have burdened homes.

In still another case it is wise to seek the doctor's help if the physical relation between husband and wife is not mutually satisfying. Homes break up because of maladjustments in the physical relation between husband and wife, yet this need not be. A wise counselor

can often provide the guidance that will enable both parties to a marriage to find satisfaction in their relationships. Yet again, it is wise to seek the help of a doctor when a couple finds after a period of time that they are unable to have children. It may be through certain tests that the preventing cause may be determined and then removed, so that children may yet bless the home.

In the business realm it is also very wise to ask advice of mature and capable advisors. It is wise for a young couple to seek advice concerning the relative merits of buying a home or of renting a home. The answer will not always be the same, depending upon whether there is a rising economy or a declining market. The seeking of advice is always a wise solution, however. It is also wise for the young husband to seek out a good insurance man with a good company and ask his help in planning a life-long plan of insurance. It may be that not all of the program can be accepted at one time, but a beginning can be made and other planks can be added in the program later.

It is certainly important in these days of easy credit for a young couple to be warned against becoming over-involved in borrowing. Any couple that is employed can easily contract indebtedness for houses, cars, major appliances, clothing and the like within a few days which will burden them financially for many years to come. Needless to say, it is quite difficult after becoming accustomed to a higher living standard to cut it down to one's income level. It is also wise for each couple to save at least something out of each pay check for an emergency and for old age. There are also many other areas in which it is wise to seek advice, but these examples are sufficient to establish the broad general principle of the wisdom of asking for information and guidance in every major decision.

A New Beginning Spiritually

The time of marriage is also an ideal time for a couple to make a new beginning spiritually. At this time they are able to see and feel God's greatness and also the wonderfulness of his plan for man as perhaps never before. As they realize that all of this wonderful experience was designed by God for the happiness and good of man they are in a position to appreciate his love in a special way. It is appropriate and desirable, therefore, for the young couple to begin their life together by reading the Bible and engaging in prayer. When this begins on the wedding night and continues day after day throughout their lives there is the possibility of untold good. A foundation is laid which will stand the storms and stresses which every marriage must encounter as sickness, hardships and death inevitably come. When there are religious differences between husband and wife it is important that the husband make an earnest effort to understand his wife's beliefs and for the wife to make a diligent effort to understand her husband's beliefs. Then they need to go to the scriptures and let God guide them to the right beliefs. This may take weeks, months, or even years, but if each enters upon the effort with open mind and a sincere desire to know God's will, it will end eventually in success. Religious unity in each home is imperative, especially after the children come. The only right way to remove disunity is through a careful study of God's word and a diligent effort to follow God's directives.

Marriage can be a wonderful experience. Marriage works best when both partners are Christians. Christ and his teachings form the foundation for the happy and successful marriage. By living life God's way man finds in marriage, and elsewhere, that life can be beautiful indeed. The Christian home is a foretaste of heaven itself.