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A Solid Foundation

“I want to be a better spouse.” You say this, thinking back over a multitude of incidents that make up the history of your family. Some of them were funny when they happened; others are funny only as we look back on them. Still others were serious. Some were puzzling.

There are months on end when a husband and wife get along beautifully; and then, out of the clear blue sky, there are frequent disagreements. Then, just as mysteriously, things clear up. This is the ebb and flow, the fascination, the never-ending variety, the multitude of moods that make up family living.

Seldom, if ever, do the circumstances of living together transform two people into an ever-loving, ever-agreeable, happy couple-fairy tales, popular love songs, romance movies, and a gamble of fate notwithstanding.

A solid marriage involves a much greater challenge than simply finding a partner with whom you live happily ever after. It is more than some strange chemistry that draws and holds you together forever. Soon after the wedding day, you realize that marriage is a test of your character.

A solid marriage does not depend on perfectly matched partners. It is a lifetime process dependent on many choices made by two free individuals who deliberately choose to get along and who continuously sacrifice personal freedom and self-interest for a mutually agreeable way of life.

Everyone has at least a few good points-ability, talent, a unique kind of charm, interesting mannerisms, or pleasing ways. But put two people together, and before long irritations, conflicts, and differences of opinion arise in spite of the assets.

Before I married, I intended to be the most congenial, friendly, easy-going husband-ever. I thought Eva would be the most congenial, friendly, easy-going wife-ever. One night, prior to our wedding, she looked up into my eyes and said, “Henry, I will spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

That sounded great! Imagine, someone wanting to do that, for me! I loved it!

I responded immediately, “Eva, I will do the same for you.” And I meant it. You can imagine what a tender moment that was! We did not know we could not live up to those promises.

We went skiing on our honeymoon and got along fine. But we hit a snag the first night home. I went to visit the guys. Nothing unusual or unpredictable about that. These men were my lifelong friends. For years we had hung out together and planned weekend excursions. That night we planned a weekend skiing trip. I went home and casually informed my wife, “I’m going skiing over the weekend with the guys.”

Remember her promise to make me happy? This was her first chance to make good on that promise!

She said, “Oh no, you’re not! You’re married now. And you’re going to spend the weekend with me.”

I was astonished, bewildered. I felt betrayed. Our first big conflict. It was quite a deal. We debated for several days before I finally got my way. No woman was going to tell me I could not go skiing!

What an attitude ... on both our parts. It had not taken us long to discover that our commitment to make each other happy was a flimsy one. Our first few years together were stormy, for we were using our respective creativity and intelligence to outmaneuver each other. Our intentions had been good, but not our ability to carry those intentions out.

My wife and I were jolted. We figured marriage would banish conflicts. No more problems with parents or siblings or friends. We would do as we pleased and express ourselves freely. To our dismay, we clashed over simple decisions.

How is it possible to feel so harshly toward someone you once felt such tenderness for? How is it possible to be repulsed at the idea of being touched by a person who you once so desired that restraint was a constant problem? How is it possible to have such sharp, unresolved conflicts when you once got along so well?

It’s a matter of walls. Invisible walls that loom up and cut off affection, tenderness, and the will to work at your relationship as you did during dating days. And it happens in all marriages.

Steve and Julie were five years into their marriage when I met them. Their relationship seemed good, at least compared to other marriages they knew about. They had much in common and had similar personalities. They were proud of their two small children. Their work with newlyweds at church was a source of great joy. Yet there was a problem that kept coming up. A wall had been constructed between them by their own hands. They were unable to see it until it was too late and they crashed into it, resulting in an “every-few-months blow-up.”

It could start in a number of ways, usually something small, like plans for the weekend. Steve arrived home from work ready to relax and recover from a hard week. “Hi, honey, I’m home,” was his greeting.

Julie, glad to see him, asked him about his workday and listened with interest as he related the events since he had left that morning. Sounds pretty good so far, doesn’t it? However, the fireworks are just about to get underway.

Julie was anxious to get the weekend planned since she liked to know what they would be doing to avoid wasting precious family time. “I hear the weather is going to be beautiful all weekend. Let’s go to the nursery Saturday morning and get some flowers to plant in the front yard. How about if we go out to that restaurant by the lake with some friends tomorrow night? I need to line up a babysitter now if we are going. What do you think?”

What man would not be thrilled to come home to a wife who is so excited about the weekend? After all, she went to all of the trouble to think about their activities; surely Steve would be thrilled. However, Steve is the kind of guy who likes to have some unplanned time. His preference is to get up Saturday morning, after sleeping late, and do whatever comes to mind.

“Whoa, I’m tired, Julie. Why do we always have to have something planned? I just want to relax. We’ll see.”

Fuming, Julie withdrew into the kitchen, slamming pots and pans as she prepared dinner.

This exchange is a perfect example of Ezekiel 33:31, “... *with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain.*”

This issue of weekend plans in and of itself doesn't seem to be a big enough deal to precipitate a major problem between two people who love each other and truly enjoy each other's company. Yet it is surprising how such a small bump can liberate all of the grievances we hold in our cup. Steve followed her into the kitchen and asked what was wrong. "Oh, nothing," she said. If he doesn't care enough about me to know how I feel, I'm sure not going to spell it out for him, she thought.

When Steve pressed her a few more times, Julie began to reel off all of the things she had been holding against him since the last big blowup. "You know I love being home with the kids, but just once in a while I wish we could go out. It's been over a month. And I walk by that pathetic front yard every day. The weeds have taken over, and the spring rains have washed out most of the good dirt. The neighbors are starting to think that we just don't care how our property looks."

Steve met each charge as his own attorney for the defense, arguing passionately for his position with logic and skill in an effort to confuse and defeat her. "Don't you think I want to go out? We agreed that we were going to try and cut back on our spending this month; besides, since when do we let our neighbors dictate to us how we spend our time and money? I agree these things need to be done, but we can't do everything in the same day."

Julie was ready for a rebuttal! "I'm not expecting everything to be done on the same day. I've been talking about this for weeks and nothing is happening. You also agreed that we need to paint the house and update our budget. Yet somehow you found time to go on that rafting trip last weekend."

Now she had gone too far. Steve felt she was being ridiculous. "That's not fair. You're out of control. You encouraged me to go on that trip. Where is all of this coming from?"

The answer comes from another scripture passage: "*Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?*" (James 4:1).

At this point, the argument took on a "same old, same old" quality.

"I just want to make a plan. Is that so terrible? Why can't you ever take the initiative on something? Aren't you supposed to be the leader in our home?" Julie asked.

“Wait a minute, I work hard to make a good living for us. Don’t I get any credit for that?” Steve retorted.

“I can never say anything when you’re in a bad mood like this. You need to get right with God,” Julie admonished.

“I guess I should just realize that everything is my fault, Miss Perfect. How can you be so judgmental? You’re unbelievable!” Steve shot back.

When Julie’s irritations met Steve’s annoyance, the bricks they hurled at each other built a wall neither of them could see beyond. Soon anger was obviously a much bigger problem than their original difference of opinion, and the focus changed.

Finally, tired of fighting and satisfied that they had each made their points, they would make up. One would call a truce, and they would make some decision about the original disagreement. They would remove some of the bricks, but the wall of their individual self-centeredness remained. And they kept running into it.

It is incredible that people can get so distressed over such little things. But we do. One incident does not mean much, but the daily grind takes its toll. After a while, resentment sets in. One disagreement does not amount to much. Enough of them over a period of time build an invisible, divisive wall. In counseling, I hear many a puzzled spouse say, “We are just not close anymore.” “I can’t stand him even touching me. There’s nothing between us.” These statements are made by people who once thought marriage to that same person was a great idea.

In the thrill of romance during dating, the differences between you may have been ignored. After marriage, you are apt to declare that you do not want to give up who you are. The bricks are laid in place between you.

No one gets married planning madness. All of the dreaming and planning is about growing closer and more intimate, not about building walls of isolation between each other. We anticipate warm glances and friendly greetings, not cold stares and sarcastic remarks. We dream of fun family vacations, not dealing with disobedient children. We have found a soulmate, not an opponent! Where does this ship sailing toward marital bliss run onto the shoals of anger, bitterness, and estrangement?

To the single person, marriage is often viewed as a destination. Just getting there will be the key to living happily ever after. Soon after arrival, however, the destination turns into a journey, one filled with the possibilities of great happiness as

well as the potential for great pain.

The journey at first seems mysterious, with many unexplained twists and turns that make you ill at ease. Soon, seeking to put some order into the situation, you construct a set of rules to live by. This is designed to prevent surprises so that you will always know what to expect from each other. But when the rules fail in the guarantee of happiness and the avoidance of pain, it becomes obvious that marriage must be about something more than rules.

It is clear to me, after years of living, counseling, and being married, that though there is mystery, it is merely the mystery of the human heart. And the human heart is forever turning to its own way. Isaiah 53:6 tells us, *“We have turned, every one, to his own way.”*

The journey is itself a series of destinations: to remain Christ-like, to communicate, to be like-minded, to live out proper roles, and to depend on God to lead and empower your marriage every step of the way.

Selfishness is a sin. Call it independence, call it a strong will, call it knowing your own mind—it’s still sin. The invisible walls that divide us will only be dismantled when we turn to God with repentant hearts and let Him cleanse our lives and fill them with His Spirit. We must seek to be unselfish and other centered as we build a marriage that will go the distance.