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Marriage God's Way

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Marriage God's Way

"... present yourselves to God ..." (Romans 6:13).

Sometimes it seems as though a long-lasting marriage is determined by chance or circumstances or just plain old luck. However, there are some steps that will enable you to establish your marriage on a solid foundation that will help you stay in it for the long haul. Taking this series of steps will bring your life into continuous subjection to the will of God. If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior, consider seeking someone out today who can show you how to know Him personally. Then follow these steps (and repeat as necessary!):

1. Evaluate your behavior
2. Accept your condition
3. Receive forgiveness from God
4. Surrender to the power of God

Evaluate Your Behavior

Before you can solve a problem, you must first find out what the problem is. We live in an orderly world. It operates according to definite, dependable laws. For example, we take care to make allowance for the law of gravity. A dear, elderly gentleman put up a ladder to do some work on his roof, but he placed it so that it was crooked. When he climbed up the ladder, it began to slide. He fell and broke his hip. Here was a man, a devout Christian, who was careless about observing the law of gravity. He fell just as the worst criminal would have fallen if he had gone up the ladder.

People take the laws of friction into account. A student took a curve in the road too fast on an icy day. His car went end over end, and he came out of the wreckage with a battered head. He had ignored the laws of friction. He did not do this intentionally. He was not deliberately reckless. Yet the same thing happened to him as would have happened to the most reckless of drivers.

All of us know the importance of abiding by the laws of gravity and friction. These laws have been gathered and catalogued in books. As we study them, we learn what to expect if we abide by them and what to expect if we violate them.

The laws of human behavior are likewise gathered together in a Book—the Bible. To understand why people behave as they do and to understand why you behave as you do, you must understand the laws contained in the Bible. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:16-17, *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

The cause of inner unrest, conflict between people, and separation from God is because people live in violation of the laws found in the Bible. Isaiah 59:1-2 says, *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.”* Deliberately or in ignorance, we reap the results of violating God’s laws, just as we reap the results of friction or gravity.

To understand the cause of inner unrest, conflict with people, and separation from God is to understand the effect of sin. To understand God’s solution is to understand the preventatives that keep us from sinning.

Paul wrote in the New Testament, *“Indeed, I do not understand what I do, for I do not practice what I want to do, but I am always doing what I hate. But if I am always doing what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is right. Now really it is not I that am doing these things; but it is sin which has its home within me. For I know that nothing good has its home in me; that is, in my lower self; I have the will but not the power to do what is right. Indeed, I do not do the good things that I want to do. But if I do the things that I do not want to do, it is really not I that am doing these things, but it is sin which has its home within me. So I find this law: When I want to do right, the wrong is always in my way. For in accordance with my better inner nature I approve God’s law, but I see another power operating my lower nature in conflict with the power operated by my reason, which makes me a prisoner to the power of sin which is operating in my lower nature.”* (Romans 7:15-23)

To illustrate, a student tells of his experience. Night after night, before he retired, he determined that he would go through the next day with a wholesome, positive reaction toward circumstances and people. One morning, he was particularly determined to have a good day. He left his room, raced for the elevator, and just as he got there the door closed. He was forced to wait a few minutes. When he did get

on the elevator, another passenger accidentally stepped on his foot. He walked away very aware that he was annoyed at both incidents in spite of his determination to react in a wholesome, kindly way toward all such happenings.

A mother of two preschool children tells of her struggle with her attitude toward her children. Two specific tasks that faced her daily caused her much annoyance. She hated herself for it, but no amount of determination, willpower, or good intentions could give her control over her annoyance at feeding picky children or dealing with their fusses. Granted, these are trying tasks, but the point here is that this woman was unable to achieve the desired attitude toward these tasks.

All of us, sooner or later, find ourselves doing, saying, feeling, or thinking in a way that is distasteful to us. And all of us, sooner or later, find ourselves not doing, saying, feeling, or thinking as we would like. All of these behaviors—or lack of them—are sin. And often these behaviors come from within us and feel as though they are beyond our control. To recognize and accept this fact is the first step toward a solution to the problem.

Most often we are angry when we are responding to the actions or attitudes of others. Anger, bitterness, wrath, pride, and hate are reactions to circumstances. These reactions may be invisible and can often be concealed to those around us, but not to God. We tend to overemphasize the value and importance of outward behavior and to minimize—or fail to realize—the importance given in the Bible to inward behavior.

In Galatians, Paul tells us, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”*

Again, these are inward, invisible qualities. You can act this way in your own strength, at least part of the time; but you can't genuinely be this way without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If you doubt it, just pay attention to your inner responses to people or circumstances for one week.

Accept Your Condition

It is easy and common to find a reason outside of yourself that keeps you from loving your neighbor as yourself. It seems reasonable that missing an elevator, getting a toe stepped on, feeding picky children and dealing with their fusses, associating

with people who have undesirable habits, or living with an uncooperative wife or husband are justifiable reasons for being unhappy. Under such circumstances anger, wrath, malice, bitterness, and resentment seem normal.

This reasoning seems to be sound. However, the Bible calls such reactions sinful. In other words, these circumstances are not putting these reactions into you; they are bringing these reactions out of you.

Jesus said, *“Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”* (Matthew 15:16-19)

Many people find this to be a shocking idea. It seems clear that the circumstances or the other person is the cause of their distress. It is hard to accept that their distress is a response to the circumstance or person.

The answer is that you can find peace and contentment without changing your circumstances or the people in your life. To do so involves recognizing that the situation you are in is not causing your distress. You must accept or acknowledge personal responsibility for your distress, for your sin.

You need a power outside yourself if you are to respond differently the next time you find yourself in a trying circumstance. You must accept personal responsibility without reservation. Dependence and faith in willpower, resolutions, insight, and/or determination are not the answer. A lingering thought that another person must be at least a little bit to blame is not the answer.

Many people prefer to find a reason for justifying anger, wrath, malice, envy, and similar emotions rather than finding freedom from them. They seek to change the circumstance or the person rather than to search for a source of peace, joy and comfort in the circumstance or with the person.

For example, consider a young man who had habits that his mother believed were bad. The mother kept insisting that her misery was caused by her son's behavior. Accordingly, this mother felt quite clear in her own mind that the solution to her problem was to see a change in her son. Further, this woman believed that, being a Christian, she should not be agreeable toward her son lest she seem to be giving her blessing on his unacceptable habits. She was being a good Christian, she thought,

by being angry and impatient with her son. The son, in turn, felt quite justified in being bitter, rebellious, hostile, and stubborn. He would not give in if it killed him. If there was a source of strength that would enable him to have a spirit of love, tenderness, gentleness, and compassion toward his mother, he would turn away from it. He insisted that his mother was the cause of these reactions.

The woman who had the task of teaching two small children how to eat right and how to stop fussing preferred to be annoyed. According to her, you should be annoyed at such a job. There is nothing wrong with being impatient with such a task. It is quite normal to be disgusted, tense, and dissatisfied at the end of the day. The children are the cause of these reactions. In her opinion, being a Christian has no bearing on the matter.

Many Christians find comfort in speaking of nerves, tension, anxiety, or stress—any term but sin. Many Christians feel that they have long ago settled the matter of living in sin. They are saved. They are sanctified.

But remember our definition of sin! *“Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness”* (1 John 3:4).

If it applies, then it applies. It matters not who you are, how much responsibility you have, what your status is, or who your family is. You may have been trained to believe that to grin and bear it, even though you are seething inside, is evidence of piety; to speak in a well-modulated voice, even though you feel like screaming, is a mark of culture; to perform the task assigned, even though you rebel inwardly, is evidence of determination. Such behavior is surely to be expected from a social standpoint. However, from a personal standpoint, you benefit nothing. Your inward reaction is evidence of sinfulness.

You have seen that acceptance of your condition implies accepting personal responsibility without reservation. If you feel that you can and will conquer your circumstances, then you are not yet ready to accept the tendency to sin. It is best for you to try yourself. Expose yourself to your circumstances and pay attention to your inner reactions and your outward actions. Acceptance means that you are convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are subject to your tendency to sin and that this causes you to react the way you do not want to react—and prevents you from reacting in a way that you would like to react. This applies to thoughts, feelings, desires, actions, or speech. These must be identified in detail and dealt with separately. Acceptance or acknowledgment of the presence of sin in your life opens

the way for you to avail yourself of a better way of life as defined by Paul: *“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death”* (Romans 8:2).

Receive Forgiveness from God

Christ died to make forgiveness available to us: *“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace”* (Ephesians 1:7).

You may have noticed that acceptance of your tendency to sin is often a difficult step to take. Seeking forgiveness is an even more difficult step to take. To ask for forgiveness implies repentance and a willingness to forsake sins. Isaiah 55:7 teaches, *“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.”*

Many people insist that a period of depression, self-condemnation, sadness, remorse, or weeping is evidence of repentance. In Quebec, one can see people climb five hundred cathedral steps on their knees in evidence of repentance. In India, a man may be lying on a bed of spikes. It is true that conviction of sin causes some people to react emotionally or to show evidence of repentance. However, true repentance is not found in the emotion or the action. It is, rather, being truly sorry enough for sin to hate and forsake it. Repentance involves following God’s plan and believing His Word.

1 John 1:9 says *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

The simplicity of receiving forgiveness is hard to accept. Nothing is required of you apart from acceptance of your sinfulness and of God’s forgiveness on His terms, not yours. This must be done from the heart. There is no other way. You must be completely sincere. You will not find forgiveness until you are convinced that you need it.

Yes, acceptance of your tendency to sin, confession of specific sins, and seeking forgiveness are contrary to our normal way of doing things. But the next step—surrender to the power of God—is the hardest of all to accept.

Surrender To the Power of God

At first glance, it would seem that to submit to the strength and power of God is something that everyone would gladly do. However, many people find this the hardest step of all to take. As Paul expresses it, *“Our sufficiency is from God”* (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Our human nature tends to rebel against accepting any kind of weakness or insufficiency. Even if you acknowledge the failures of your past, you may be unwilling to acknowledge your inability to please God in the future. We all tend to feel that since we understand the reason for our past failures, we can now do better. We tend to seek the answer to our sinfulness in two ways: to repent for past sins and to retain confidence in ourselves not to repeat past sins. We tend to retain our faith in our own self-discipline, willpower, training, and self-sacrifice.

To surrender to God means we must commit ourselves to a lifetime study of His will for every detail of our lives. It means recognizing our inability to do His will apart from His power and our need to submit to Him daily for His power.

Colossians 1:10-11 teaches us, *“...that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy.”*

To surrender to God involves a clear, definite yielding of one’s self completely to God, followed by day-by-day experience of that surrender. Note Paul’s words: *“And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”* (Romans 6:13).

This is a matter of the will. Ephesians 5:18 instructs us to *“Be filled with the Spirit.”* Here is the secret of God’s power—the Holy Spirit expressing Himself through us! He works in us only as we let Him.

A young woman was married to a man who refused to give her spending money. This disturbed her to the extent that she was always feeling sorry for herself and was angry with her husband. She went to an older woman in the church who was known to be a calm, peaceful soul. The older woman said to the younger one: “Let me tell you my story. My husband keeps all the money. He seldom pays any attention to my opinion. Now that the children are married, he gives most of his time to them and

has no room for me in his life. This has gone on for thirty years. It will probably go on as long as I live. All these years I have prayed daily for patience and every day God answers my prayer.”

This man’s behavior is totally selfish and another whole topic of discussion. But the point here is that his wife surrendered her unhappiness and frustration to God and found daily grace and strength to continue to love him. To surrender to God is to bring each circumstance of life to Him and receive from Him the strength to face it by His Spirit. It is one thing to make a broad, thoughtless statement that you will submit to God and another thing to surrender each detail of life to Him.

When you are impatient, you lack patience; when you are unhappy, you lack joy; when you are tense and anxious, you lack peace. You must continuously go to the source of supply. Comfort, mercy, grace, peace, joy, patience, and longsuffering with joyfulness will be yours only when you recognize that you lack them and when you let God give them to you.