

Getting Marriage Right - Building a "Good Enough" Marriage

Today we continue in our series on marriage called Getting marriage right. As I have said previously the term 'right' is a bit misleading as nobody can get marriage 'right' – as in perfect – but we can get it heading in the right direction and that is what we have been talking about. We have talked about choosing well, conflict, money and this morning I want to talk about 'right expectations' as far as marriage goes.

We live in a world where everyone is striving to do better, better education, better standard of living, better job, better hours, better pay packet, better house, better parent and of course a better marriage. And of course there is nothing wrong with any of those things, but if we are not careful the process to get there can cause us to sin. ie striving for a better standard of living can cause us to change our priorities, more time at work neglecting family, or God, spend money on different things not being generous or merciful with our money etc.

Same thing can happen if we strive for the perfect marriage, so today I want to talk about a "good enough" marriage.

Hang on a minute Brian, since marriage is such an important relationship, shouldn't we want the best one possible, it sounds like "good enough" is settling for less than best. And yes of course we want the best marriage we can have, but bear with me as there are a few problems with setting 'excellence' as your goal in an intimate relationship.

The first problem is that husbands and wives, tend to, define excellence differently.

- A wife might define an excellent marriage as one where her husband is deeply sensitive to her needs and extremely flexible when she isn't sure she understands what she needs. She might want her husband to be devoted to her (of course), serving her and the family without complaint.

Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAOiNVK3mzQ&list=RDfAOiNVK3mzQ#t=11>

- The husband on the other hand might want his wife to understand all the pressures he faces at work and be highly supportive when he comes home. He wants the home a refuge where he can enjoy the calm because everything is organized so well.

Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGMUvBSxv04>

This difference of opinion in couples about what constitutes their ideal marriage becomes extremely frustrating. Each one wants what they deem best and wonders, "Why won't he or she just cooperate." But the problem is they're

defining excellence in terms of what they want to receive, rather than what they can give. If you define excellence that way, you'll be frustrated.

But there's an even bigger problem.

Our culture has so elevated marital expectations, it seems an excellent marriage is our right, and if we don't get it, we'll find a different partner who'll give it to us. There are lots of seminars and books instructing us as to how to have a great marriage, but some couples have misunderstood the point of all this good information. They say to themselves, "Shouldn't my marriage be able meet my every need, to fill this hole in my soul?" And the answer to that is, "No." Only God can fill the hole in your soul.

Marital expectations in the western culture, and unfortunately the Christian community, have spun totally out of control.

But there's another pitfall.

If you get obsessed about having an excellent marriage, you will create a different kind of culture in your marriage. It's a culture – not of grace – but of performance. It's a culture not of security and shelter...but of accomplishment, achievement and critique.

It's a bit like golf. Anyone who has played golf knows that golf is an incredibly humbling sport. Some people call it a good way to ruin a pleasant walk. But let's say you love the game of golf, and you're pretty good, and you've been shaving points off your handicap. So you start daydreaming, "I wonder if I could join the golf competition?" Suddenly, every time you play golf your perspective is different. You're thinking improving, about perfection. You've got to make Tiger Woods-type shots – every time. And you're quickly humbled. What used to be a very fun game has become very burdensome. Just like golf is not a game of perfection, marriage is not a relationship of perfection.

So let me propose a different alternative.

I want to propose that the best marriages are not the so-called 'excellent' ones, but the 'good enough' ones. And here's how I would define a 'good enough' marriage: **It's not perfect, but it's moving more and more toward deep friendship.**

Friendship isn't about getting everything matched up to expectations. Friendship is about being warmly connected in the grind of daily life...even if things are less than ideal.

So what I want to do this morning is to help us move toward a 'good enough'

marriage and to do that I want to initially address our unrealistic marriage expectations.

- I believe there are five myths regarding an "excellent" marriage.
 1. Myth one – **"In an excellent marriage, couples resolve most of their problems."**

This is not true. John Gottman, a psychology professor, published a study in which he said that the healthiest couples are out of sync with each other two-thirds of the time. In other words, even if you are doing really well in your marriage, you'll still feel disconnected 66% of the time.

When I first heard that statistic I felt relieved, maybe Gay and I are normal after all! I think most of us would think the percentage would be far less...but his study has been confirmed over and over again in his research.

On the other hand, the good news is that one third of the time you are in sync with each other. You're solving problems, enjoying romance and feeling the love. What I conclude from this is that the best marriages are like the best batters in cricket. If you hit a 4 or a 6, 33% of the time, over a few years, you're going to reach the cricket hall of fame pretty quickly. But good cricketers don't connect with the ball every time. Similarly, Hall of fame marriages are going to experience connection/harmony only about one third of the time.

So the challenge is this: when you don't connect with the ball well, miss the ball, don't connect well with your spouse, don't be frustrated that didn't get it perfect. It's not going to happen all the time. Rejoice that you have another shot and enjoy the blessings of your relationship. They're a gift from God.

Moreover, if you read your Bible, you discover that even in the best relationships there were problems. If problems festered in even the best relationships in the Bible, you will encounter your share in marriage as well. You simply will not resolve all your problems.

That leads to a second myth.

2. Myth two – **"In an excellent marriage, couples rarely express anger."**

Let me fill you in on another item of research by John Gottman. He identifies three types of healthy marriages.

- **He said some marriages were volatile.**
In these marriages couples are highly expressive. When they disagree, they argue, bicker, and express opinions - with passion. These people do everything with passion.

They're not afraid to get angry, and sometimes that anger is sharp. But they also get over it. They don't resort to sarcasm, or name-calling or contempt. Instead, they may use humour, affection and teasing to soften some of the sharpness of the anger, but these people are out there.
- **The second type of marriage is the validating couple.**
This couple also believes in emotional expressiveness, but in moderation. They're slow to anger, but express it especially when big issues come up. The rest of the time they are very nice and affirming.
- **The third type of marriage is the conflict-avoidant couple.**
This couple rarely enters into conflict. Their goal is acceptance and agreement. When tensions rise they explore each other's emotions, affirm each other's point of view, and they do this in a very calm way. When conflict is severe they agree to disagree.

Now here are three types of healthy couples...with three completely different styles...all reporting high levels of satisfaction. But let me ask you a question: Which couples do you think were most romantically inclined after 35 years of marriage?

It's not the conflict-avoidant couple, and it's not the validating couple. The couples most romantically inclined after their 35th-anniversary were the volatile couples...the couples most apt to express anger openly, fairly, productively, and then be done with it.

So it is simply not true that excellent marriages have little anger. Just the reverse! In good marriages couples are mastering the skills of being angry, yet without sinning against each other.

And that leads us to myth number three.

3. This myth is stated this way. **"I might be able to have an excellent marriage if I was married to someone else."**

This is the myth of the greener grass. Sometimes someone else looks more desirable than your spouse. And you think, "If I was married to him/her, we wouldn't have the problems we have."

But let me assure you... generally speaking...if you were to change partners, you wouldn't eliminate problems, you would merely change the kind of problems you have.

If you're tempted to daydream about the greener grass on the other side of the fence, I have bad news for you. It's a fantasy. Marriage is fraught with problems and challenges, and you will never arrive at the problem free marriage or even an almost-problem free marriage.

This does not mean that you just put up with the problems, especially if they are significant, all I am saying is a perfect marriage is not a realistic goal.

Here's myth number four.

4. Myth four – "Excellent marriages shouldn't take so much work."

This is the idea that if this marriage is meant to be, excellence should just happen...naturally. No hard work required, especially if we are Christian!

The problem with this is that marriage is a counter-intuitive relationship. You've got to confront your natural inclinations. By this definition, marriage will never be easy. For instance...

- The natural inclination for a husband is to treat his wife the way he wants to be treated. But, of course, that doesn't work because she's a woman, and, what she needs is to be treated like a woman. That's a counter intuitive skill.
Women are from Venus and men are from Mars is a great book that talks about these differences. Or the book, Five love languages, have transformed a number of marriages.
- the natural inclination of a wife with the love-language of serving is to serve her husband. But what if the husband's love language isn't service? What if it's words of affirmation? The wife has to learn to love her husband in a counter-intuitive way. That takes work.
- The natural inclination of a spouse who receives criticism is to give it back. But Peter tells us we shouldn't return evil for evil or insult for insult but give a blessing. That's a counter-intuitive skill.

All I'm saying is this: Being a good lover is a counter-intuitive skill, and therefore all marriages require a lot of work.

Paul put it this way. He said, "Husbands love your wives like Christ loved the church." If Jesus' sacrificial love wasn't hard work, I don't know what is. Just think about Mel Gibson's movie The Passion and you realize how hard he worked to express his love.

And that leads us to myth number 5 which is the opposite extreme to myth 4.

5. Myth five – "To build an excellent marriage we'll need lots of professional counselling."

This myth probably originated in America where it seems like everyone needs a therapist and we here in NZ have picked that up through TV programmes and talk shows.

Yes, marriage can be hard and some of our problems can stem from childhood wounds, maybe from bad parenting or bad experiences and it can be very hard to work through it on your own; it really helps if you can go and get help from a professional if you get stuck.

So there is some truth to this, but the problem is obvious. Most couples can't afford professional counselling. If myth number five were true it would mean that only those with money could achieve a really good marriage. God certainly didn't design marriage that way.

So those are five common myths floating around in our culture about the possibility of having an excellent marriage.

So how would I define a 'good enough' marriage: **It's not perfect, but it's moving more and more toward deep friendship.**

As I have said before, marriages fail not because we found the wrong person but because we go wrong inside. The really important question is not "Is he/she the right one?" but "Am I the right one?" There's no such thing as a perfect partner, but there are ways to make a marriage work. And there are things you can do to ensure your marriage will be one that lasts.

1) Talk

Marriages aren't built on good looks, magic attraction or sexual bliss - but on something much more ordinary: good communication. Talk freely about anything, discuss subjects you're interested in - talk *honestly* about what's bothering you - don't bottle it up and wait till it bursts! Some people are naturally big talkers; others are naturally quiet. There's nothing wrong with that. And communication can go at the speed you're both comfortable with - so long as there is communication.

2) Listen

Some people seem to do plenty of talking - but their conversations are dialogues of the deaf. They never really *hear* each other. Listening is hard work. It means going past the words and picking up the *feelings*. It means putting yourself in your partner's shoes and deliberately looking at things from his/her points of view. It means giving your partner your full attention - eyes and ears open, mouth firmly shut!

3) Play

Life isn't all talk. And you'll wear each other out (or bore each other to death!) by being serious all of the time. So relax, laugh and have fun. Enjoy simply being together. Find just a few things you can have fun doing together.

4) Be Friends

There needs to be a solid feeling of companionship between you. Is your partner your first choice for spending free time with? You've got many years ahead of you, and that desire for each other's company must be very real if your marriage is to succeed. Friends bring out the best in each other. Friends make each other more alive, more creative, more energetic. Friends help each other celebrate life.

5) Understand each other's moods and emotions

No two people are the same, outwardly or inwardly. And if your unique temperaments and moods could be *seen*, you and your partner would probably "look" as different emotionally as you do physically. Whether you're uptight or easy going, shy or confident, quick-tempered or calm ... there are fears, frustrations and pressures which each face privately. One of your jobs in marriage will be to get to know and understand and *support* the emotional make-up which God has given your partner. The goal is not to make your partner conform to your moods, but to help each other handle these unique feelings in healthy, positive ways. Work on it.

6) Be willing to give - or give up - things for each other

Too many people marry with the idea that they'll be looked after (especially blokes) - and their partner becomes more like a parent substitute. But if it's a

mature relationship you want, you need to be genuinely concerned about your partner's needs.

A successful marriage doesn't need 50% from you and 50% from your partner - it needs 100% effort from each of you.

7) Check things with the manufacturer

Marriage can be the most delightful, satisfying relationship on earth - and even more so if it has a bit of heaven in it!

God has clearly stamped his joyful approval on marriage. Let's face it: "male and female" was his idea in the first place. So was love and marriage. Maybe with his help, the two of you will find it easier to love, to accept, to give, to forgive. Those special ingredients are things God specializes in. So, talk with your Maker.

Conclusion:

The bottom line is that there are two ways you can think about marriage: You can aspire for a so-called excellent marriage. But there is a downside. Couples striving for an excellent marriage, usually end up highly conscious that needs are not getting met.

But couples who aspire to a "good enough" marriage have a completely different mind-set. They're focused on friendship. As time goes on they are gradually conscious that many important needs are actually getting met. But they're getting met - not because they force them - but they get met as the by-product of the friendship.

Amazingly, they have what the so-called excellent couples want, but they've obtained it indirectly. And when they get it, they're humble about it and say, "You know, whatever we have is solely by the grace of God."