

Getting Marriage right - Finding the Right Person

Proverbs 3:5-6

Decisions - anyone who has lived very long on this old world of ours will tell you that life is full of decisions, day after day after day. We begin making decisions the moment we wake up at the beginning of the day and don't stop making them until we drift off to sleep at the end of the day. Think of all the decisions you've already made just this morning.

- “Will I push the snooze button and then 5 mins later – will I push it again?”
- Listen to those kids fighting again, will I intervene or just leave them to kill each other?
- What will I eat for breakfast?
- Will I go to church? What will I wear?”
- Then when we walk into the church foyer our decisions continue: “Should I have a coffee? Someone is sitting in my seat so where will I sit now?”
- Should I try and stay awake for the sermon?
- What will I have for lunch? Will I invite someone for lunch today? Will someone invite me for lunch?

Of course these kinds of decisions are not all that crucial - they're not life-changing, so it doesn't make that much difference if you make a wrong choice (except the sermon decision!). But there are other decisions in life that are crucial. They are very important. For example: “What should I study at uni?” What school will I put my kids in to? “What career will I pursue?” Should I take this job opportunity? Should I buy that house? Move to that city” These decisions can be life-changing decisions.

One of the most significant life-changing decisions we make is of course marriage. This one is huge, this one is a lifelong decision, one that we try not to get wrong, because to do so will cause us (and our loved ones) to endure a great deal of misery.

Now, when it comes to the decisions of life and how to make them wisely the Bible provides us with some good advice. We find it in our passage this morning, probably one of the most quoted verses in the bible:

Proverbs 3:5-6.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways [all your decisions] acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

Over the next few weeks, with one or two interruptions, we will be looking at some very practical issues around “Getting Marriage Right”. We’ll learn to fight right. We’ll look at managing our money, we’ll look at building the right marriage and the challenges around parenting and marriage.

And this morning we begin our series by starting at the beginning - the challenge of finding the right person to marry. Of all the billions of people on this planet, how do we choose the right person?

On some of these important decisions of life, we can make things all very complicated, But I’m a simple bloke and I think simple is good. Kids have a gift in this area.

- When asked, “What do most people do on a first date?” Jacob, age 10, said, “On the first date, they just tell each other lies. And that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date.” Jacob has apparently dated a great deal in his 10 years.
- Here’s another one: “Is it better to be single or to be married?” Elizabeth, age 9, says, “It is better for girls to be single, but not boys. Boys need somebody to clean up after them.”
- William, age 7, simply said, “It gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I’m just a kid. I don’t need that kind of trouble.”
- Here’ another one: “How do people in love typically behave?” Jess, age 8, said, “When a person gets kissed for the first time, they fall down and don’t get up for at least an hour.” I don’t know about you but I think Jess has very high expectations when it comes to communicating affection in a physical way. I’m very concerned for her future husband.
- When asked, “How do you make love endure?” Erin, age 8, advised, “Don’t forget your wife’s name. That will mess up love every time.”
- And David, who is also 8 years old, said, “Be a good kisser. That might make your wife forget you never take out the rubbish.”
- Here’s one more, “How do we know who we’re supposed to marry?” Ten-year-old Kristen said, “No person really decides before they grow up who they’re going to marry. God decides it all way before and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.”

Well, is Kristen right? Is that how it works? If so, how do we know who it is that God has picked out for us?

Now, I realize that the majority of us present this morning have already made our selection, and “we are stuck with them”. You may be thinking right now

that it's okay to tune out, although you might be interested in discovering where you went wrong? Well, please don't tune out because this message is for all of us for several reasons. First, you may be called on by a single to help with their decision. And, second, as parents, I believe we have a God-given responsibility to guide our children, and perhaps even our grandchildren to make this very important decision in a God-honouring way. And finally, the youth, while thinking about marriage might be years away, you are even now forming your own ideas when it comes to who to go out with, which is designed to prepare you for marriage in the not too distant future. So everyone needs to listen to this message!

To help us learn to get this part of marriage right, I am drawing on Bill Hybels' book, *Making Life Work*, and various other sources.

(1) Take it slow.

The first error people often make is to marry too quickly, or if they don't get married, they get into bed too quickly. There is a study that establishes a strong correlation between long courtships (old fashioned word I know but there is no good replacement) and satisfying marriages and an equally strong correlation between short courtships and heart-breaking marriages. So take it slowly.

This is not something that couples caught up in the excitement and passion of young love want to hear, but they need to listen. They have everything to gain and almost nothing to lose by developing their relationship slowly over a long period of time. Every extra month of going out together either builds or erodes their confidence in the health of their relationship. Either way, it is a winning deal.

So how long is long enough?

Rules and regulations are dangerous, there are many factors; age and maturity, individual situations, but a bit of wisdom that I like is; from the time your relationship becomes serious, you should go through the seasons, in other words going out for a year. Obviously if you are 80 and are checking out this hot 79 year old, a year may be a bit extreme but on the other hand if you are 18 and think you have found your one true love, you probably need to pace your passion for a bit more than a year.

Now, I know you're thinking "I know a couple who got married after knowing each other for only two weeks, and they're still in love 20 years later. (*From the people who have been married 20 years or more, who has the shortest courtship*)

We all know that sometimes short courtships work, and it is great when they do and I want to celebrate that. But sometimes people survive car crashes even when they are not wearing a seat belt, but that doesn't mean seat belts should be removed from cars.

While that high-intensity emotion associated with initial attraction and romance is really exciting, it will settle into something else.

The question is; what will it settle into?

- Boredom? Disillusionment? Frustration? Emptiness? Loneliness? Sadness?
- Or will it settle into a deeply satisfying and mutual friendship?

Only time can answer those questions.

The stakes are incredibly high. So go slowly.

(2) Second, grow up first.

The second mistake that leads many people into unhappy marriages is that they go through the spouse selection process when they are too young. Why don't we let 3-year-olds play with knives? Why don't we let 8-year-olds drive cars? Why don't we let 12-year-olds stand for parliament? Because they haven't reached the stage in their development necessary for them to handle those responsibilities wisely. They may not be bad, stupid or immature. But they are children!

So what age is right? Again rules are dangerous. Maturity is the issue not age. In looking at this I am going to get myself into trouble. I married at 20; was that too young? It was young, but we are still married, but does that make it "right".

The experts in psychological development now believe that few human beings reach a point of psychological maturity before age twenty five, this is significantly older than what it used to be a few decades ago. They say that most people younger than that are still engaged in the intense work of establishing identity. They are trying to answer one of the most crucial questions in life: Who am I? In terms of personality and preferences, people in their teens and early twenties are still being formed. Most people under the age of twenty-five are also deeply involved in the process of separating from their childhood home. The whole education system has prolonged this.

It's not to say that you should not get married before 25, you can work through these issues with a marriage partner, in fact it can be a really good thing, but the risk of failure is higher.

Statistically, divorce rates are lowest for men and women who wait to marry until they are 28 years of age or older. That does not mean 28 will make the perfect marriage. The highest divorce rates are among those who marry during their teenage years or early twenties.

I guess the truth that I want to bring out in this is not some perfect age but the fact that the chances for a satisfying marriage are best for those who grow up first and marry later. Again a bit of practical application to this could be - don't marry until you have left home and been working for a year.

Be sure you're grown up before you get matched up.

(3) Before you walk that aisle, really know each other.

Many selection mistakes stem from the fact that spouses don't really know each other, in that they have not shared a wide enough range of life experiences.

- They've never weathered a tragedy together.
- They've never resolved a conflict with one another.
- They've never negotiated a serious compromise over a deeply held value.
- They have never worked through a financial challenge.
- They've never really talked about each other's careers or life aspirations.
- They've never worshiped together.
- They've never gotten to know each other's friends or families.

Before you choose a spouse you need to do things together that give you the chance to really get to know this person. You need to know how this person behaves and reacts to the kinds of difficulties that come with life in a fallen world. That year-long-courtship will give you a preview of what it would be like to share the future with that person.

(4) You especially need to know the broken places.

This is something that often isn't talked about, it can seem intrusive, private, painful. But it is vital. Think about it. When we buy a used car, we get it AA checked or take it to a mechanic to give it a once over. We want him to tell us if the brakes are good and if the engine has any defects. We want to know if it's been in an accident and if so, was it repaired properly. When you buy a house you have a building inspector crawl around under the floors to see if the foundations are good, are there any leaks and to check out the roof and the plumbing and the wiring. You want to know if it's a good investment. Smart buyers want as much information as they can get before they buy. Don't get me wrong. It's not that they will never buy a car or a house that isn't perfect. It's just that they want to make the decision with their eyes wide open. They want to know what they are dealing with.

Potential spouses should be just as wary. They need to know about the damage life has caused their future mates. They need to know how they have dealt with that damage. They need to know about their broken-ness. This is another one of the purposes of courtship. In that process we can discover problems with anger or jealousy, or selfishness or a lack of basic integrity. Unfortunately many times potential spouses who see these problems think, “Well, when we get married they will experience the tremendous healing power of love and he or she will change.” That is simply foolish. Remember - before marriage we put our best foot forward. After marriage things don’t get better - they usually get worse. So, know what you are getting into. Ask yourself, “Can I live with this person with all their shortcomings for the rest of my life, knowing there’s a good chance they won’t change?”

(5) Finally, when it comes to choosing the love of your life, be compatible.

Contrary to what most of us believe, researchers in the area of marital success have concluded that the thing most likely to make relationships work over the long haul is similarity. I know it is said that opposites attract, but studies show that often the very things that initially attract two people push them apart later. This is not to say that personality differences between spouses are necessarily bad, but as Hybels points out, “. Marriages built on differences, on the attraction of opposites, without an underlying foundation of core similarities are usually headed for trouble.”

With this in mind, let me quickly offer four areas of compatibility that should be in place before partners stand together at the altar.

A. First there is the magic factor

This is attraction, chemistry, and in spite of what you may think, some of the most powerful examples of the magic factor are not found in Hollywood, but in the Bible. For example, in the book of Genesis we read about a man named Jacob who met a woman named Rachel. He felt such a powerful attraction for her that Genesis 29:11 says the first time he greeted her, “**Jacob began to weep aloud.**” Any of you husbands do that?

Jacob had to work seven years to get her father’s permission for them to wed but their attraction was so strong that the Bible says these years, “**seemed like only a few days.**” (Gen. 29:20)

This attraction is the “somewhere across a crowded room” kind of thing where your eyes meet and you think, “Who is that girl?” or “Who is that guy? I’ve got to meet him!” Well, I believe one way God reveals to us who we are to marry is with this “magic factor”, this attraction we feel toward our spouses. It’s like our

Designer taps us on the shoulder and says, “That’s her! That’s the one you are designed to love!”

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying we should marry the first person that makes our heart skip a beat, but don’t under-estimate the importance of a mutual attraction. Think of it as a foretaste of the kind of attraction and love that will build over the years in a Godly life-long commitment.

B. Next there is the character factor.

Proverbs 11

³Good people are guided by their honesty; treacherous people are destroyed by their dishonesty.

I don’t want to say much on this, it is pretty much self-explanatory. Character is a theme repeated throughout the whole bible.

What this means for selecting a spouse is clear. How could any of us hope to build a satisfying marriage with a person who lacks integrity? Perhaps if two people are equally deceptive, they may find some sort of twisted happiness together, but anyone striving to live with integrity before God and other people, must marry someone who shares that same goal. This is called character compatibility.

Character disharmony destroys marriages.

C. The communication factor

The third area of compatibility regards communication. The idea of two people communicating on a deep level sounds simple, but you don’t have to be married long to realise it is not so easy to accomplish. Most marriages fail because 'we just couldn't talk to each another'. Before marriage, a young woman may be charmed by the strong, silent type with whom she is going out. And the bloke may be thrilled to have found a partner who is mysterious. But silence and mystery often prove to be deadly in a marriage. Couples whose marriages are flourishing list among their reasons for success the fact that they 'talk about everything'.

Proverbs 20

⁵Someone's thoughts may be as deep as the ocean, but if you are smart, you will discover them.

People in mature relationships learn how to lovingly and patiently draw deep personal thoughts and feelings out of one another. Let’s face it, guys are really good at this, all we need to do is ask our wife how their day was and wham the floodgates of communications begin. Women have a bit to learn in delving into

the deep places of men. No you can't demand that they have to talk,.... now!! You have to go carefully, gently, take time, ask subtle questions, listen, ask more questions, wait, affirm, encourage.... And if you are lucky you might get a couple of grunts.

Seriously, it takes two people who are willing to talk and willing to listen. An authentic dialogue requires the full involvement of two parties.

D. And then finally, the most important area of compatibility is the God factor.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, ¹⁴*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)*. Now this passage is not solely referring to marriage. Paul's words should be considered to any significant relationship, but in no other relationship are we so intimately 'yoked together', so I think it does need to be considered as we look at marriage.

This is not very PC teaching and I am not saying that marrying an unbeliever means that you are defying God. But I believe if you step back from the situation and reflect on this instruction from God, you will begin to see that it flows out of the idea of basic compatibility.

It is one thing if partners do not share a mutual love for ballet, rugby or country and western music. If other dimensions of the relationship are satisfying, a couple can handle those differences (maybe not country and western music). But when a person places God at the centre of his or her life, but their spouse just thinks that is stupid, that can produce deep disharmony. When someone desires above all else to walk with God, to please God, to serve God, and the spouse couldn't care less about the things of God, there is bound to be some deep loneliness in that marriage. And when children come along, it complicates matters even more.

Going against the biblical wisdom about spiritual compatibility is a risky move in getting married. My advice is, don't even think about it.

This morning, if you are not currently married but plan to be, I hope you feel encouraged not to be overly casual about this life decision.

Parents and Grandparents take your role seriously and help your kids make this choice wisely, maybe starting to pray now for your child's future spouse and the decision they will make.

And if you're someone who feels they have made an unwise choice, please don't quit. Don't give up on your marriage. Because while making a right decision is going to help, it is not all about the choice, it is actually about becoming the right person, that will make a marriage successful. Work at becoming more and more like Jesus. Ask God to help you love your spouse in a truly Godly way. Ask Him to give you both a vision of how wonderful your marriage can be.