

Put A Ring on It

Q & A

May 26, 2019

Good morning everyone.

If you're new with us you need to know that today we're concluding a five-week series called "Put A Ring On It" in which we have been talking about marriage.

When we planned it several months ago, I knew there was no way I would be able to think of all the issues that it might raise, so I decided that this final week's message would be devoted to answering whatever questions you all submitted.

What's funny is that I had several people this past week ask me "did you get any questions for this Sunday?" And when I said "yes, quite a few" almost every person seemed

surprised.

I'm not quite sure what to make of that. Maybe they were hoping I wouldn't have any and there would be a really short message? I don't know.

In any case, here we are and I have 10 questions that I'm going to address that were either turned in or came up in conversations.

But before we jump into it let me give just a very brief review of what we've covered so that all of this is in the proper context.

Review

In the first week we talked about the fact that most people now live together before getting married.

The reason for doing so for most people is

“let’s improve our odds of success, i.e. let’s do better than the divorce rate of our parent’s generation. Let’s do a test drive on our relationship before we put a ring on it.”

Unfortunately, over 20 years of intensive research has shown that the result of this strategy is actually worse than that of previous generations.

On average, couples who cohabit before marriage have a 33 percent higher chance of divorcing than couples who moved in together after getting married.

There are a bunch of reasons why it turns out that way and we talked about several but, basically, what happens when people cohabit is that they enter into a commitment based on *constraints* rather than a commitment based on *dedication*.

In other words ...

- They have sex (which creates an emotional and physical bond like no other)
- They live together (which creates financial constraints)
- They get a dog or a cat ... another emotional constraint
- They may even have a child ... all kinds of constraints

All these factors keep them constrained in the relationship *without having fully dedicated themselves to each other.*

And because constraints are hard to break, what happens far too often is two people who should never marry end up married ... which means that, eventually, they become miserable and then they divorce.

Now, the point of that particular message

wasn't to shame anyone who *has tried* or *is trying* that strategy – you're just doing what our culture says to do. The point was to say that there is a far better way without risking all the financial and emotional carnage.

And that is to find an equally-yoked partner because ...

An “equally-yoked” partner is the single best strategy to ensure marital success.

An equally-yoked partner is someone who has the same values and vision that you do; someone who is going in the same direction you're going in life.

And in the rest of that message I talked about some very specific ways and some very specific questions that will help determine that.

In the second week of this series, we looked at why marriage is such a big deal in the first place. Why do we care if people get married instead of just living together? What difference does it make – if any?

Turns out it makes a huge difference.

Turns out that marriage is the single best strategy for the success of “the human project.”

The best strategy for overall human flourishing is (to put it in the biblical words of Moses, Jesus and the Apostle Paul) for “a man to leave his father and mother and cling to his wife and for the two of them to become one flesh.”

Now, that doesn't mean it's the single best plan for every individual – some people are called to be single – but massive amounts of research reveals that the stability and well-

being of society at large is directly related to men and women entering into the “for better or worse, ‘til death do us part” commitment of marriage.

In week three, we looked at the “S-Word” and why, if you’re going to experience happiness and contentment and joy in marriage over the long haul, you have to have a lot of it.

Of course, most people thought the S-word I was talking about was “sex” – which *is* important – but the most important S-word – the one that is essential to marriage is the word “submit.”

... with the quintessential expression being:

*Submit to one another out of
reverence for Christ.*

Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)

Of course, in our current culture even just saying the word “submit” turns people off. A lot of people, when they hear it go, “oh, that’s is just the old fashioned patriarchy at work; husbands powering up on their wives, demanding they obey because God says so” ...

... which is why I spent a lot of the message describing what the non-Christian Greco-Roman world was like at the time Paul wrote it.

Basically, a wife in that culture was considered *property* of her husband and, therefore, she was to submit to him just like slaves were to submit. Her primary role was to produce children – hopefully *male* children – who could eventually help him run his business ... which meant that few people ever married for love (like we do today).

But Paul said "that's not the way followers of Jesus are to do marriage and family. Instead, because Jesus – who was at the top of the pyramid – submitted himself to humanity (even to the point of death on the cross), all parties in the household who claim to follow Him are to submit to one another out of reverence for Him. No more of this 'everyone bow down to the man; everyone serve the man.'"

And then Paul went on to lay out what mutual submission meant for everyone in the household with the most radical change being that the husband was not to think of himself as the master of everyone else but as a slave to Jesus.

And instead of lording it over his wife, he is to love her and serve her, to give up his life for her ... just like Jesus did for all of us.

It was a game-changer in the history Western Civilization especially for women. And it can be a game-changer in marriages today. And I gave a few examples of that in the final part of the message.

Finally, last week, we talked about “trouble in paradise” ... specifically:

- That the root cause of all divorce is some form of hard-heartedness ...
- And how to keep your heart from going there when conflict and hurt inevitably happen ...
- And then what to do and not to do if your heart or your spouse’s heart has grown hard.

I won't go back through that one since it was just last week but, I do want to say that if you missed it or any other messages in this series, you can always watch, listen to or read it by going to the media tab of our app, website or checking out our podcast.

So ... that's what we've been talking about over the past four weeks which means that now we're ready to jump into the questions. I've grouped them according to the week that they pertain to most.

By the way, if you asked a question and I don't cover it, it's because we don't have enough time to include it. Or it could be that I combined it with another.

So here we go ...

“Beating the Odds”

Q1. We lived together before we got married which means our odds are worse. What do we do now?

You do what all successfully married couples do – you work on your relationship.

The point of the research wasn't to say it's impossible to succeed. The point was to say that marriage is hard enough to begin with and living together first just makes it that much harder. It adds one more factor that works against success ... just like choosing an unequally-yoked partner is a factor that works against success.

In addition, researchers themselves say that while they might be good at identifying risk factors associated with *groups* of people, they are not as good at predicting the future of a specific couple. Higher risk is higher risk

but *it's not destiny*.ⁱ

So, work on your relationship. Work on your communication skills. Pray for your spouse, pray for your marriage.

Oh, and stay involved in church. Research also shows that people who regularly attend evangelical churches – like North Heartland – are 35 percent *less likely* to divorce compared to those who have no affiliation.ⁱⁱ

Q2. Should we share with others the information you presented in this message? If so, what's the best way of doing it?

... which is actually two questions I combined into one.

As to whether we should share this information ... I wish more young people knew about the horribly negative spiritual dynamics of sex before marriage and living

together before marriage (especially for women – they almost always get the worst of itⁱⁱⁱ) ... but, at this point, I'd be happy to settle for just the research getting out there.

So, yes, by all means, whenever it is possible and appropriate, share that information.

- Send a link to the message I did.
- Or suggest an internet search for "cohabitation effect." The research isn't hard to find.

But when you do that remember this: if you're a Christian, you have one responsibility to others above all others and that is to love them.

Paul wrote:

*Owe nothing to anyone—
except for your obligation to
love one another. If you love*

*your neighbor, you will fulfill
the requirements of God's
law. Romans 13:8 (NLT)*

... which is exactly what Jesus said.

Love must be your motivation, not being
"right" or proving a point.

And that means sharing the truth but doing it
in a way that respects the other person's right
not to listen *and* – and this is the important
part – continues to help them and serve them
no matter what they decide to do.

So if you can commit to that, you say
something like, "Look, I will love you no matter
what you do, but I can't rest without sharing
this information" – and that needs to be true,
too; this needs to be a burden from God so to
speak.

"I'm going to give this information to you, but

I'm not going ask if you read it. I'm not going to ask what you think about it. I'm not even going to mention it unless you bring it up."

And then you let it go. And you pray for them. And you stand ready to help them no matter what they do with it

That's how truth and grace express themselves in love.

"Big Deal"

These next two questions come out of the second message in the series, *Big Deal*.

And they specifically have to do with the biblical definition of marriage we read earlier: "a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife and the two will become one flesh."

So here goes.

Q3. What should you do if another relationship (parents, in-laws, adult children, children, step-children) keeps taking priority over the marital relationship?

Oh my gosh, I could go on for hours about this one because I have seen so much conflict over this issue.

I'll tell you what Jetta's father once did when his mother-in-law kept coming into his house without knocking.

One day, when he was home alone and he heard her coming, he went back into his bedroom and took off all his clothes. She went through the house looking for everyone and when she opened his door, there he was spread-eagle naked on the bed.

She didn't come in without knocking

anymore.

Now, that's a little extreme so let me give you another plan

The first thing is that you have to get on the same page with your spouse about *boundaries*.

A boundary defines what is yours (or, in marriage, ours) and what is everyone else's: your time, your space, your money, your whatever.

You and your spouse need to agree on those things. *What is ours alone and what do we share time-wise and space-wise with the rest of the family including our kids?*

And just like everything else in marriage, it will probably take a lot of negotiation (and if you're Christians, prayer) to define those boundaries. You won't get everything you want and your spouse won't get everything

they want. And you have come to peace with that if you want to have peace in your home.

And then – this is the really important part ...

You have to communicate those boundaries and be prepared for pushback.

But hold your ground because the most important relationship is the marriage relationship. And you know that even if everyone else doesn't.

<Putting kids to bed at night>

"The best thing for kids is for mommy and daddy to love each other and to do that we need time alone. Good night. See you in the morning."

Q4. How do you balance being "one flesh" with the commandment to "honor your father and mother" when your parents or your spouse's parents need you?

Great question – one I had to wrestle with five or so years ago when my parents and one of my sisters moved here from D.C.

In my wildest imaginations about the future, it had never occurred to me that I might live that close to them again. We had been here in KC for almost 25 years. They had lived on the East Coast their entire lives.

But it happened. And it was necessary. They needed me ... which meant that it was going to impact Jetta, too.

So, how did we balance everything? It was hard at first. We both prayed a lot.

And there were a lot of conversations just between the two of us but, bottom line, it pretty much came down to this:

I decided *I would protect her* (specifically her boundaries) and she decided *she would support me* in my responsibility.

By the way, I'll just throw this in: this is another reason why it is so important to choose an equally-yoked partner.

Because she is a follower of Jesus, Jetta understood that, since I am the oldest and the only son, I had a unique responsibility. She also understood – and this is important – that it would violate my conscience to neglect my duty to them.

So, over the past five years I have occasionally had to sit down with my parents and clarify the boundary with them and, thankfully, they've always been understanding. And many times Jetta has willingly jumped in and done things *for* them and *with* them instead of me.

I protect her and she supports me. That's how we try to keep the balance.

“The S-Word”

Ok, these next few questions came from the S-Word message.

Q5. You talked about submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. But what if your spouse isn't a Christian?

This situation happens a lot:

- A person who is a Christ-follower marries someone who isn't.
- Or, two people who are not Christians get married and then one of them becomes a believer.

What you then have is a “spiritual mismatch” ... which can lead to a whole lot of dissension,

especially if the *Christian* spouse is unwise and tries to jam their faith down their partner's throat.

Turns out this was also an issue in the first century and there are two letters written which address it.

First, from Paul to the Christians at Corinth:

If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. 1 Corinthians 7:12 (NLT)

And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him. 1 Corinthians 7:13 (NLT)

On the other hand ...

*If the husband or wife who isn't a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the believing husband or wife is no longer bound to the other, for God has called you to live in peace. 1
Corinthians 7:15 (NLT)*

So, point is that a spiritual mismatch is not a valid reason for a follower of Jesus to divorce someone who is not. If *they* want to leave then, OK, let them go. You're no longer bound to the marriage covenant.

But the reason you don't leave *them* ...

... Paul says is ...

Don't you wives realize that your husbands might be saved because of you? And don't you husbands realize

*that your wives might be
saved because of you? 1
Corinthians 7:16 (NLT)*

“Understand,” Paul is saying, “that God wants you to be an influence on your spouse.”

But, again, not in an obnoxious way.

Of course, the harder question is ... if you're a believer do, you still “submit yourself out of reverence for Christ” to someone who isn't a believer?

This was a very big question in that time because, as we learned in that particular message, the position of a wife in a Greco-Roman household was one of subordinate to her husband.

And Paul said that even though she was now free in Christ, she should still respect her husband's position of authority in that culture

not because she had to but because she chose to. She was to consider her service to him as a way of serving Jesus.

But if he doesn't follow Jesus, should she still do that?

That's where the second letter comes in, this one from Peter – who was an eyewitness of Jesus of Nazareth which is why we take seriously what he wrote.

And Peter also had some things to say about how life in a Greco-Roman household ought to work for followers for Christ and it was almost identical to what Paul said.

In one of his letters, he wrote:

You wives must accept the authority of your husbands ...

In other words, "remember, ladies, that's how

it works in this culture. And it's OK. Don't be offended because our King, Jesus, also chose to be a servant."

He wrote:

You wives must accept the authority of your husbands ...

And then he adds ...

*... even those who refuse to accept the Good News. 1
Peter 3:1 (NLT)*

Even if he is not a Christian.

And then Peter explains why.

By honoring the conventions of our culture and your husband in this way ...

Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words.

*They will be won over by
watching your pure, godly
behavior. 1 Peter 3:2
(NLT)*

Now, in our day and in our culture, we don't have the same system of household order that the Romans and Greeks did. No one in our culture is saying that the husband ought to always be in command, though some Christians interpret Paul's writings to mean that this is God's divine plan for all time.

As to whether that is true or not, I said in that message that I can see it both ways ... which means if you're a Christian, you should study it for yourself and follow your conscience on it *without judging anyone else*.

But regardless of how you see it, if you are a Christian married to someone who is not, you are still called to submit to them.

That might or might not have something to do with their authority but, at the very least, to submit to them means to put them and their needs first and yourself and yours second ... just like Jesus did for you when you were still an unbeliever.

Alright this next question mentions a passage also found in that letter to the Corinthian church which is a logical implication of what we've been talking about ...

... so let's look at it before the question:

The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

Corinthians 7:3-4 (NLT)

See the principle there? "Submit to one another" applies even to sex!

And notice the equality for women there? She has authority over her husband – which was a radical shift.

Now, here's the question:

Q6. Does this give your spouse the right to sex whenever they want it even though you aren't feeling loved and cared for?

Great question!

Let me answer it in two parts. First, let's talk about *rights*.

If your spouse is a Christian and he or she ever says – about *anything* in marriage (not just sex) – "this is my right, you have to do <whatever>" ... he or she has completely missed the point.

The point is for followers of Jesus to willingly *give up their rights* (as Jesus did). It's not "this is how your spouse is supposed to treat you, so feel free to demand it from them."

That's about as anti-Christian as you can get!

Now, let's talk about sex and feeling loved and cared for. And let me just give you some old-married-guy wisdom on this:

If your spouse isn't feeling loved and cared for ... and you demand sex from them ... you're an idiot.

Here's why:

If your spouse communicates that he or she doesn't feel like you care about *their* needs – sexual or non – and you ignore that ... and you then push them for sex ... you will push them further away from you emotionally ...

which means that sex will become even more of a chore and a “have to” for them.

Another piece of old-married-guy wisdom:

Sex is best when your spouse “wants to” not “has to.”

So, direct answer to the question: does your spouse have a right to sex when you don't feel loved and cared for?

Technically, yes. But they're a fool to exercise it.

But you probably shouldn't say it that way. And you probably shouldn't say “Rick says you're an idiot for doing that.”

Instead, maybe say something like, “I'd be a lot more excited about this part of our relationship if you would be more considerate to me in this area.”

And then of course, pray that he or she will be open and receptive to what you're saying.

This next question is along the same lines ...

Q7. How do you balance the emotional needs of the woman with the physical needs of the man?

Old-married-guy advice ... you don't. It's almost never in balance, especially when you're younger and the hormones – both emotional and sexual – are still really strong.

So, what you do – if you want your marriage to work – is ...

You willingly choose to go beyond your personal preferences.

Specifically, if you're the more sexually-amped-up partner, pull back just a little on that and put more effort into being more

emotionally sensitive (and if you don't know what that looks like, ask your spouse. He or she will tell you).

If you're the more emotionally-amped-up partner, pull back just a little on *that* and put more effort into being more sexually available.

That's what mutual submission looks like. You subordinate your desires to those of your spouse. And if both of you will do that, I predict you will be pleasantly surprised.

Ok, final question in this section:

Q8. What if you and your spouse aren't on the same page with how to parent your kids?

... such as how to relate to them, discipline them, how to prioritize family time, etc?

Not to be a smart-aleck but welcome to

parenthood. ☺

Seriously, Jetta and I had two very different approaches especially when our three daughters were younger and then again when they were teenagers.

- When they were young, I had very little patience with them but she did.
- When they were older she had very little patience but I did.

We used to tell them if it was up to either one of us alone, they would be horribly scarred for life!

Point being, humility is a huge key.

You have to be honest about your strengths and weaknesses. And then you build your strategy on that.

I followed Jetta's lead in parenting for the first 10 years or so. And then she followed mine for the last 10.

Again, that's what mutual submission looks like.

Now, I should also add that humility means that you take the time to educate yourself about raising kids. I've not met one person who "just knew" how to do it including myself.

In fact, from my observations and personal experience, most parents parent backwards. Instead of controlling their kids when they're young, they try to do that when they're teenagers and too old to be controlled.

And instead of influencing them as teenagers, they try to do that when they're young and don't have the capability to reason

and understand.

Point being you have to humble yourselves as parents and get educated.

And then, on top of that, you have to pray. Pray for wisdom, pray for your kids.

“Trouble in Paradise”

Ok, we're almost done here. A couple of questions having to do with “trouble in paradise.”

Q9. How do you know when your marriage is truly over?

Two things for sure:

1. It's over when your spouse says it is.

If they're wanting a divorce it's over.

Notice I didn't say if they're wanting a separation. Sometimes when people are wounded they just need a time-out to restore their heart. And if you give them that timeout with whining and complaining and begging, a lot of times they'll come around. Their heart will soften and you have a chance.

2. It's over when your trust has been destroyed and you've tried but you can't restore it.

When that happens, you're pretty much done.

Notice, by the way, that I didn't say "it's over if and when you fall out of love." If you're a Christian, that's not your standard. Jesus' commitment to you isn't based on feelings. And your commitment to your spouse isn't based on that either.

Ok, last question and I hesitated to include it

because to deal with it fully requires knowing more details about the situation. And it's probably something that needs to involve a professional counselor.

But here goes ... very quickly ...

Q10. What should you do if your spouse is emotionally attached to someone else and you suspect they fantasize about them?

First thing is to pray for wisdom and strength.

Second thing is to try and stay calm. I've never met a man or woman who hasn't wondered about being with someone else. That doesn't excuse it, but what's happening isn't some strange new thing unique to you and your marriage. And it isn't necessarily fatal.

Third, avoid speculation and accusation. If you're wrong, you will wound your spouse. If

you're right, you will produce shame. Neither are productive to getting your relationship back on track.

The best strategy is to communicate "I'm uncomfortable with this. I feel threatened by this." And then ask for some boundaries to be established.

And if that doesn't work, it's time to see a counselor or meet with a pastor or mature Christian friends with whom you can be transparent.

If that doesn't work, it's time to raise the stakes and ask for a separation.

Again, I'm not sure I'm giving a good answer because I don't know the exact situation, but those are some general guidelines.

Conclusion

I think from these questions that it's obvious that marriage is challenging.

And dating is challenging. Being single is challenging. Trying to figure out relationships in general is challenging ...

... which is yet another example of why we need the Lord.

- We need Him to give us His vision for these things instead of blindly adopting what everyone else thinks and says.
- We need Him to give us wisdom and discernment about people and situations.
- We need Him to give us strength to do the right thing even when it's hard.

- And we need His righteousness because we fail and fall short – we sin – in all of those things.

So, whatever your need is today, I'm going to invite you to use the next few minutes to express that to Him in a prayer as our band leads us.

Would you stand and join them in singing *Lord I Need You*?

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2015/03/eight-ideas-for-protecting-your.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/about/focus-findings/marriage/divorce-rate-in-the-church-as-high-as-the-world>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865655846/Women-premarital-sex-and-divorce-Study-unpacks-some-surprises.html>