

CHAPTER 36

TWELVE PITFALLS IN MARRIAGE

Sermon Summary

March 25, 1978

Many marriages in America today are deeply in trouble! Statistics show close to one third are breaking up.

I recently received a letter which I think illustrates the sorrow and grief of this worldwide problem. It reads:

"Dear Mr. Rice,

I am writing to you as a last resort to save my marriage. I don't know what has happened to the beautiful romance that Jim and I once shared. We laughed a lot, did things together, and spent many evenings after dinner just sitting and talking at the table. We were so much in love for the first few years of our marriage, but something has happened to us.

"We were married in the church about nine years ago, and have three beautiful young children. I desperately want them to grow up in a happy home — and ours sure isn't.

"As I now think about it, this frightful change in our relationship began happening about five years ago and our marriage has steadily gone from bad to worse. Our attitudes toward each other today, compared to what they were then are as different as light is from darkness. By the time Jim gets home from work every night, I am completely worn out from cleaning, working, cooking, changing diapers, settling squabbles, and all the dozens of chores that mothers must tend to. Jim is tired, too, when he gets home, and he just wants to relax, have a beer and read the paper. I'd like for him to entertain the children for a while so I can prepare dinner, but they get on his nerves and he yells at them. Then I get mad and yell at Jim.

"The only time Jim ever kisses me or shows any affection is when he wants to go to bed, and that really turns me off. I can't remember the last time he told me he loved me.

"We hardly ever go out anymore, and just don't seem to have any common interests — except the children, and even here we can't agree on how they should be trained.

"Every time we try to discuss the problem, we just end up blaming each other. Jim gets mad, and I start to cry. This makes Jim even madder. Yesterday, he finally asked for a divorce.

"Is there any hope for our marriage? I really don't want a divorce, but I can't go on living like this. Can you help us?"

Sincerely, A Troubled Wife"

In this sermon summary, I want to point out twelve very specific reasons why marriages crumble — and what can be done to avoid or overcome these causes of discord and misery.

NO. 1: THE SUBTLE AND ERODING INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD

It used to be in our society that marriage was tremendously respected — something very special. Divorce was virtually unheard of — premarital immorality was taboo. Now, that's all changed. Today immorality, sexual exploitation, and pornography are rampant.

There really is a raging Devil who is pumping out his perverse concepts and influence into our nation's homes and marriages through the media of radio, television, movies, and a wide assortment of printed materials. The Devil is on a rampage! He's out to destroy and erode away the great holiness and sanctity which God bestowed on marriage. You and I are exposed to these subtle influences continually — at every turn!

"Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (II Tim. 3:13 KJV)".

It's so easy to be affected by our environment — to absorb the around, to drink in of the evil influence of the world. In most American homes hostilities, jealousies, hatred and anger between marriage partners are constantly being depicted on television — making marital breakdown a commonplace spectacle right in the living room! Everything that marriage shouldn't be — promiscuity, unmarried people living together, divorce, extra-marital affairs — is paraded before us (and our young, impressionable children) day after day.

So, gradually but relentlessly the Devil seeks to undermine the holy and wonderful values of marriage. Instead of growing together, husbands and wives start growing apart and shrinking up within themselves.

What about your marriage? Is it as beautiful and lovely as it was the day you became engaged, walked down the aisle together, and experienced the joys and delights of a happy honeymoon with your mate? Is your marriage stronger today than it was then? Or, have you become a little used to the idea, allowed the newness and novelty to wear thin, and the excitement to evaporate? Have you permitted your relationship to become emotionless, dull and boring?

The Bible gives a picture of the kind of marriage that all families ought to have: *"Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in His ways. For thou shalt eat of the labour of thine hands; happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round thy table. Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord"* (Psa. 128:1-4 KJV).

God describes in this Psalm the kind of environment that you and I should create for our families. It speaks of good health and success and a scintillating life. It depicts children who can come to Mom and Dad with any problem that's troubling them and not be uptight or afraid they will be cut down or rejected. It talks about a wife who is deeply happy, fulfilled and feels appreciated. Yes, it describes the wonderful life of holy matrimony God intended that both partners experience — laying a foundation Satan cannot destroy.

NO. 2: FAILURE TO KEEP GOD AT THE CENTER OF YOUR MARRIAGE

The power to really love another human being with an enduring love comes from God's Spirit. When we are walking in fellowship with our Father, God gives us a love with which we can love even our enemies! How much more, then, our friends, and most importantly our own wife, or husband, and our children.

One reason couples fight and bicker is that they haven't been praying enough! Frequent prayer is a vital link between God and man — and makes possible that great reservoir of love and concern which can smooth out the "rough spots" in relationships with others. (Rom. 5:15)

You'll find that people who walk with God, who are really close to Him in prayer and Bible study, and living the right way, radiate out to others a genuine concern and purity of character. This closeness to God can make a tremendous difference in the effect our lives have on others.

Whenever a husband will get on his knees and ask God's help to love his family, to rout out selfishness from his life, to think of his wife and family first — this inspires his wife and children to shower love and affection on him in return. The good fruit of love, concern and respect coming from his life can stimulate the same in the lives of those dear to him.

When a wife will do her part — praying to God, drinking in of His nature and mind, His Word, and acting on what He leads her to do — she communicates this to her husband and it will inspire him.

The interaction of God's Spirit in a family builds a unity which is marvelously beautiful!

It can be a wonderful exercise for you and your mate to pray together. And if you have young children, have them spend some time in prayer with you. Teach them how to pray and ask God to keep you all happy together, to guide your actions and conduct, to give you a right heart and attitude, so your marriage and family will be strong forever.

Are you taking God into your marriage with all your heart? Is He a part of you? Is your fellowship with God first, and is that fellowship communicated to those around you? God must be a part of your marriage for it to be successful and permeated with love and unity.

NO. 3: TROUBLE BEGINS WHEN THE HONEYMOON ENDS

I'm not talking about the five or six day trip that is taken after the wedding ceremony. I'm referring to that time into marriage — say nine months, or a year or two later — when the romance and those

excited feelings of newness and love begin to fade. It's a sign of trouble when "dull routine" sets in.

For example, a wife can be doing the chores of housework day after day, and starts to find it's getting old. She wakes up and realizes that married life has hard work to it — cleaning, dusting, sweeping, doing dishes, taking care of babies, etc. She begins to reminisce on her past life, her freedom and independence. She may watch soap operas and see things that stimulate her. She begins to think about the good times she used to have in those relatively "carefree" days before marriage. The marriage becomes a drab, colorless "prison" in her mind. Her love can slowly begin to erode away.

What once was an exciting adventure for the beautiful young bride has now become dull and boring.

The husband also can lose the radiance of that early "first love." He can begin to take his wife for granted — and not see her as the lovely, romantic, desirable girl he courted. Perhaps his compliments are further apart, he doesn't notice and appreciate the effort she puts into the housework — and just generally seems oblivious to the nice little things she does.

In a situation like this, it's easy for an atmosphere of hostility to build. Bickerings and fights can break out quickly. Both marriage partners start shrinking into their own private little worlds and become terribly selfish — thinking the other doesn't care anymore.

To safeguard your marriage and keep it young and exciting, recapture the values that brought you together. Go back to the foundation and start anew. Put new life and vigor into your relationship. Try to be more affectionate, appreciative and understanding. Start practicing love and you'll find that your former feelings will return. Look for the positive things you used to admire in each other and try to be less critical when faults appear. Keep your honeymoon vibrant and alive.

NO. 4: LETTING PHYSICAL AND PERSONAL STANDARDS GO TO POT

When young people are dating, they are very careful to "put the best foot forward." They will dress nicely, make sure they are clean, smell fresh, are neat — and always courteous.

But, once into marriage, people will tend to degenerate — allow these important qualities to slip away, and their standards to fall. They become slovenly and neglectful in body hygiene. Their appearance suffers.

It's important to constantly express respect in marriage. God is the author of marriage, and keeping standards on a high level of dignity actually shows respect for Him.

This doesn't mean that a man always has to wear his best clothes, but even with work clothes on he can look nice — and always be courteous, thoughtful and well-mannered.

The same holds true for wives. I recommend that when a wife feels haggard after a hard day, she take a few minutes to freshen up (perhaps shower, brush her hair, put on a little perfume) so she looks more attractive for her husband when he comes in the door. "Primping" a little can brighten her disposition, too!

When a couple lets down their standards, the whole marriage begins to slip. Keep your standards high. It's vitally important to express active love and honor toward your mate. She has feelings. He has feelings. Respect the other as a dear, wonderful partner whom God has given to you for life. She's yours, you are hers. You are "one flesh" and belong to each other. Honor the greatness and beauty of your marriage relationship — and build it stronger by keeping your standards high.

NO. 5: A BREAKDOWN IN CHARACTER AND RESPECT

Unless there is respect in marriage, there is no marriage. Respect is based on character, discipline and love. When you lose inner respect for yourself, other people around you lose respect for you, too. Whenever a person becomes selfish, childish, critical or judgmental of others, he or she is destroying character. Unless that respect is rebuilt, problems loom on the horizon.

Discipline must be an important facet of your life if you are to experience real success in marriage. You must keep an awareness and respect for God at the forefront of everything you say, do and think. Ask God to help you always be strong, courageous, honest and true.

Keep your self-respect high. Maintain quality standards of discipline in consideration, thoughtfulness, and helpfulness. Keep your life free from guilt and sin! These principles are essential to building a happy home and stable marriage.

NO. 6: FAILURE TO HONOR THE ROLE EACH PLAYS

The Bible teaches that the wife should respect her husband because he's the head of the family. But, wifehood and motherhood is also a role to be highly esteemed. It's a God-ordained office just as

much as a man's headship is an office! Both mates have vital roles to play! God, Himself, established these responsibilities to upbuild and strengthen the marriage relationship itself.

The fact that GOD has assigned each a distinct function in marriage should be honored and respected by both. These offices are not humanly ordained. The Creator of the universe has established them. The wife is not obligated to honor her husband just because he says she should. She should do it because God says so.

The giving and receiving of honor actually is a privilege to be experienced by both mates. For, as the Bible tells wives to submit to and honor their husbands, it also tells husbands to deeply love, cherish, protect and honor their wives (Eph. 5:21-28 and I Pet. 3:1-7).

NO. 7: FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE WHEN IRRITATIONS START TO BUILD

Waiting until emotions have built up steam usually leads to an explosion! It is better to catch irritations in the early stages. If something is really bugging you, or your mate, it's important to get it out in the open and talk about it.

Here are seven brief "rules" for building communication into your marriage and handling problems that come up:

1. Never get angry at the same time.

When disagreements do arise, keep your temper under control. Curb your own anger until the other has had a chance to express his or her feelings — to "blow off steam" if need be. One of you should always strive to remain calm when the other is upset. Self-control helps greatly in leading to a peaceful solution.

2. Choose the right moment to discuss your feelings.

If your husband comes home tired, exhausted, worried or under pressure, don't bring up irritations then. He probably won't be able to listen with attention and patience. Wait until you find the right time, when he's more relaxed and in the right mood, to bring up problems or differences.

3. Really listen to what your mate is saying.

If an irritation is starting to build and your mate is being upset and offended by it, wouldn't you want to know what it is? The only way to learn is to listen patiently. Listen to what your mate is saying. Be attentive! Be respectful! You may have to ask some questions to get clarification. But listen sympathetically and with understanding! Listen with your heart and mind, as well as with your ears.

4. Don't retaliate or point the finger.

Justifying oneself does not solve the problem, neither does accusing the other. Don't retort by saying, "Who are you to chew on me...why, you've got problems, too." You don't really solve a problem when you retaliate like that and "put your mate in his or her place." Desire to correct your mistakes and make peace at all costs.

5. Honestly admit where you are wrong.

It takes an enormous courage and maturity to do this. It takes tremendous humility to say, "*Dear, I'm sorry. You're right and I'm going to work on that.*" Or, to say, "*I really didn't understand it that way. I see and understand it now. I appreciate your telling me.*"

6. Determine to change and follow through.

It isn't enough to listen and agree. You also have to determine to change. In some cases you may want to pray and confess your faults together. The important thing is to show a willingness to go all out and remove any stumbling block you may be putting in the other's way.

7. Set aside time for heart-to-heart talks.

Husbands and wives need time alone, even if only 10 to 15 minutes. During this time both should give their honest opinions about the way things are going — in the family or in their own relationship. This is not a time to criticize or evaluate each other in a harsh man-

ner. Rather, these should be "building talks." Times to discuss problems — and progress which is being made. Also areas that need additional work and improvement. Try to be honest, candid and frank — but also considerate and sympathetic. If there are improvements in certain areas, it is good to compliment and praise each other for these accomplishments. These talks should be positive and uplifting. Both mates should sit down together, with open minds and attitudes, with the desire to upgrade their marriage and grow in love.

NO. 8: LACK OF MENTAL AND SOCIAL STIMULATION

Mental stimulation is a powerful tool that helps keep a marriage exciting and healthy. Husbands and wives will find some of their happiest moments when they "rap" about ideas and concepts they've been thinking on and want to share with someone else. This point is altogether different from solving conflicts or resolving differences. It has to do with hearty interchange on a wide range of subjects that are educational and uplifting. Each will discover that the other has some unrealized wisdom, excellent ideas and intelligent answers to many of life's nagging questions.

To incorporate this point, it's good to read a lot and keep your mind attuned to what's happening in the world. Keep abreast of news and social trends. Become knowledgeable on a variety of topics. And above all things — dare to think, to question, to reach out and search for answers!

Share your thoughts with each other and ask for feedback. It's this hearty interplay that will truly endear you to your mate, and expand your own mind to a higher realm you did not dream possible. Such a practice will do much to keep your marriage bright, vibrant and healthy.

It's also good to have people over for visits as you can afford it — or perhaps just for a cup of coffee. These get-togethers will build and sharpen your powers of observation and mental alertness. Hospitality is a command of God. *"Use hospitality one to another without grudging"* (I Pet. 4:9). By socializing with friends and new acquaintances, not only are you rendering them a Christian service, but also you will be upgrading your own life. By broadening your circle of friends and associating with people from diversified backgrounds, you will gain many new insights and increase your fund of knowledge.

Make these talks pleasant and wholesome and avoid passing on gossip or unfounded rumors that may prove hurtful to the reputation of others.

NO. 9: GETTING WRAPPED UP IN MATERIAL THINGS AND GOING INTO DEBT

Being in debt puts undue pressure on both mates. The man can become uptight, edgy, and upset — especially when the bills come due and he doesn't have enough money to go around to pay them all. The wife usually has to suffer the brunt of the telephone calls and the bill collectors coming to the door.

Often, these strains lead to fights and quarrels. The wife thinks the husband is not providing enough — and perhaps he can't. The kids are unhappy because they have to wear hand-me-downs, and don't have nice toys, better clothing, and recreational opportunities.

A recent survey by Brigham Young University concluded: "The couple that stays out of debt is more likely to stay together. "

Most people are in debt, and have no savings. If an emergency should strike, they are in trouble. This can create extreme pressure and difficulty for a married couple. Most marriages would be happier if debts were kept to a minimum.

NO. 10: FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND MOODS AND ERRATIC BEHAVIOR

God does not change, but we human beings can swing emotionally like a pendulum. We often get discouraged and upset over the slightest little thing. Unless we understand the nature and characteristics of moods and temperaments, we can misread our mates emotionally.

Everybody has moods and it is vital that we understand them. If we are close to God, we shouldn't have a lot of moodiness. But, we're not perfect yet, so we're going to have those moments when we're unhappy with life. If you find your mate in a period of the "blues," don't pry or ask too many personal questions, but do be sympathetic and willing to listen if he or she wants to talk. Show concern, but don't press for answers.

NO. 11: FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY GOD'S TWO-FOLD PLAN FOR MARRIAGE

Ephesians 5:25 states, *"Husbands, love your wives."* This is a very basic precept of Christian family structure. It further states, *"...even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it."*

How did Christ love the Church? | John 4:19 gives an interesting answer: "*We love Him (Jesus Christ) because He first loved US.*"

The point is: Since the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church, he's to love her first, as Christ did the Church. The responsibility to love rests first with the man. He's to follow the example that Jesus Christ set.

I know it's natural for husbands to think, "*Well, she's to love me, and serve me because God has set me over her as the head of the family, etc.*" No, the Bible actually shows just the opposite. God places the greater responsibility of love on him first, because he is the head — the leader in charge. Therefore, he should be up front showing the way, setting the example, serving his family and looking out for their interests and welfare. When he has done these things first, their love for him will naturally follow.

Isn't this the precedence that Jesus Christ set — and is still practicing today? He not only gave His life for us, but also he's looking out for our needs, guiding us, helping us and blessing us in manifold ways.

If you as a husband will follow this rule and view your headship as an opportunity to love, you'll find that your wife will reciprocate in kind and wear her knuckles to the bone to serve you. She will do this willingly because you have inspired her to.

Now, the second part of this two-fold answer is found in Ephesians 5, verse 22: "*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*" The word "submit" means to respond to him, to uphold him, to honor him. It's another way of saying love him, and to be grateful for his generosity, his affections, and his many little kindnesses. You should now want to do this because he loves you, strengthens you, compliments you, and gives you all that he has to offer — his time, energy, thoughts, his spiritual help and encouragement. Submit means to give him equal love in return and to respond to his needs and give him every encouragement to face life's challenges and to be a success.

The two-fold answer is simple: "Husbands, love your wives. " And, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands. "

NO. 12: LACK OF TOTAL COMMITMENT AND CONSISTENT HARD WORK

The word "work" is the one ingredient that is oftentimes missing when marriages collapse and disintegrate. It takes work to eradicate selfishness — to keep your emotions under control. It takes work to build positive relationships and to keep your commitment strong. In order, then, to have a stable and happy marriage, you should strive to be the best wife on earth, to be the most outstanding husband — to work diligently to keep respect and honor for each other in clear, sharp focus.

Are you going to continue in a marriage that's unhappy and about to go under, when you can correct it? I think it is most encouraging to remember what King David prayed about in Psalm 51 when he was finally caught in sin. He became very sorry for his mistake and repented of it bitterly: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me*" (Psa. 51:10).

Take your problems continually to God. Ask Him to create in you a clean heart! To renew a right spirit within you and give you the courage to step out and turn things around! Husbands, take the lead and be the first to initiate a reconciliation. Resolve to sit down together in private — just the two of you — to iron out your differences and start a new life.

Kneel down together before God in prayer and say: "*We're tired of all this fighting and arguing, and all these conflicts that make us unhappy and miserable. We're tired of doing it our way and ending up being total failures. God, restore our love again. Give us love for each other.*"

Then, if you'll get up and put into effect the love God will provide, you'll start improving your relationship tremendously!

ACT NOW!

Now is the time to renew your marriage commitment and go on a permanent honeymoon! A honeymoon that will last and last and weather all storms because it's founded on God and His great love.

If you will apply the principles of this summary — with God's help and guidance — your marriage can be filled to overflowing with happiness, love, accomplishment and success!

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