

RELATIONSHIP RESCUE

Marriage Maintenance

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On her first anniversary, a young bride was talking to her mom on the phone. She said, “Momma, I always knew I would marry Mr. Right. I just didn’t know his first name was going to be Always.”

A young son asked his dad, “Is it true, Dad, I heard that in certain parts of Africa a man doesn’t know his wife until he marries her?” Dad said, “That happens in every country, son.”

Dear friends, I have a lot of experience, but very little wisdom on marriage, so I am going to lean on the Bible for its wisdom today.

This message is called Marriage Maintenance. I chose “maintenance” to describe a positive plan of action.

The opposite of maintenance is repair. There is a big difference between maintenance and repair. Repair implies that something is broken and needs fixing. Repair happens after a major problem occurs. Repair is reactive to a bad situation; maintenance is proactive to prevent a bad situation from arising. Maintenance is about dealing with a problem before it starts.

The best way to avoid a major repair in your relationship is to provide ongoing maintenance. If you don’t, you may find yourself praying the prayer we’ve been looking at in Psalm 144.

Psalm 144:7

Reach down from heaven and rescue me; rescue me from deep waters.

It’s a prayer of repair. I don’t want you to have to pray a prayer of repair. Instead, I want you to gain God’s wisdom of relationship maintenance.

Today, we’re going to find wisdom in Proverbs 5. Many of you have heard me point out before that Proverbs is a book of wisdom in 31 chapters—one for each day of the month. That means that, along with whatever else you read in the Bible each day, you can read one chapter of Proverbs each day. If you do that, you’ll get God’s wisdom repeated 12 times in the course of a year. That’s a good way to grow in wisdom!

This proverb is sometimes called “the proverb of an immoral woman.” However, the immoral woman is actually the challenge that the proverb tries to steer around and avoid. It might be

better to call this proverb “a proverb for a married man,” because its aim is to preserve a man in his marriage. As a result, a lot of what I say today will seem to be focused on married men. That’s not to say that it couldn’t apply also to married women, or any people contemplating marriage, but the text will focus on the men. Let’s look at the introduction to this proverb.

Proverbs 5:1-2

¹ *My son, pay attention to my wisdom; listen carefully to my wise counsel.*

² *Then you will show discernment, and your lips will express what you’ve learned.*

“*My son, pay attention to my wisdom.*” That sums up the key to the wisdom of Proverbs. If you read it often and think about it carefully, your life will change in a positive direction. You’ll show discernment, and you’ll speak with clarity.

Today, based on Proverbs 5, we’re going to make a three-point marriage inspection. We’ll check up on our marriages, by asking ourselves three Marriage Maintenance questions. Are you ready?

Question #1 — Am I Protecting My Marriage?

In marriage, two people who have been living independent lives are made one. Jesus said, “*They are no longer two, but one*” (Mark 10:8). Pause and take that in: no longer two. Then Jesus said, “*Therefore, those whom God has joined together, no one should separate.*”

Both husband and wife share responsibility for the continuing union of their marriage, but each in a unique way. Yesterday, at Gordon’s funeral, I had occasion to speak about his marriage with Lurine, and about marriage in general. I pointed out that the word “husband” originally referred to a “house-band”—the one who held the family together, the one responsible for *securing* the marriage union. That’s what a husband and father is to do: not let his marriage fall apart, but diligently hold it together.

A wife’s role in the union has a different emphasis. Paul admonished wives to “submit” to their own husbands. In the Greek language of the New Testament, that verb described the pillars of a bridge, that bore the weight of traffic and stabilized the path. Wives are responsible to provide the internal *support* of the marriage union.

The husband *secures* the union from the outside by the strength of his faithful embrace, while the wife *supports* the union from within by the strength of her loving endurance. (If you read Proverbs 31 in this light, you will find it most illuminating.)

The danger is that the husband will let go, or the wife will give up. Each must protect their marriage. They must protect the marriage from a root of anger or unforgiveness, which would cause them to let go. The Bible says, “*Don’t let the sun go down on your anger*” (Ephesians

4:26). The usual application of that verse is this: don't go to bed angry at one another; talk out your differences.

One couple, who had been married to each other for 50 years, reported that they had never gone to bed angry with one another. When asked, "How did you do that?" They responded, "Well, sometimes we stayed up for days."

We often bring the habits of our childhood into our marriage. Perhaps your own habits, perhaps the habits of your parents. At times, you will live out your married life in the same way that your parents lived theirs. You may not want it to be that way. You may try not to follow in their missteps, yet you'll still hear those dreaded words from your spouse: "You're acting just like your father (or mother)."

Sometimes, it's the little things—things just between you two—that you have to protect in your marriage.

But this Proverb reminds us that there are also some big things from which you need to protect your marriage, and one of the most damaging, most dangerous and destructive is immoral behavior.

Proverbs 5:3-6

³ *For the lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil.*

⁴ *But in the end she is as bitter as poison, as dangerous as a double-edged sword.*

⁵ *Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.* ⁶ *For she cares nothing about the path to life. She staggers down a crooked trail and doesn't realize it.*

These verses describe the immoral woman: she is alluring, attractive, inviting—dangerous indeed!

Real men don't commit adultery. For that matter, real women don't commit adultery. Infidelity will suck the life right out of a marriage. Adultery is a harsh word. We're reluctant to use it. We'd prefer to soften it by using different language, so we talk about "having an affair," instead. It sounds almost innocuous.

Like the stock market crash in 1987, which one newspaper called a "fourth quarter equity retreat." It wasn't really a crash. Pacific Gas and Electric no longer refers to their invoices as "power bills" any more. They are now called "energy documents." Insurance companies warn that if you jump out of a window, you might experience "sudden deceleration trauma." Really? I guess so!

But I want to be clear with you. No matter how you say it, adultery is adultery. And real men and women protect their marriage, and they don't allow adultery through the door. These

days, the statistics regarding who's responsible for committing adultery are almost evenly split between men and women. So I ask again, are you protecting your marriage?

Proverbs 5:7-8

⁷ *So now, my sons, listen to me. Never stray from what I am about to say: ⁸ Stay away from her! Don't go near the door of her house!*

In other words, don't even let temptation get close to your marriage. It doesn't say, "Don't go in and sleep with her." It says build a hedge even further back. Don't even go near the door of her house!

If you pray, "*Lead us not into temptation,*" but scan Playboy magazines, or watch so-called "adult" videos, or drink with strangers of the opposite sex—you're gutting your prayer, voiding its intention, and rendering it useless. Would you call that protecting your marriage?

What will happen if you don't maintain a generous distance between your marriage and such temptations? Verses 9-11 describe three results, and they are not pretty!

Proverbs 5:9-11

⁹ *If you do, you will lose your honor and will lose to merciless people all you have achieved.*

¹⁰ *Strangers will consume your wealth, and someone else will enjoy the fruit of your labor.*

¹¹ *In the end you will groan in anguish when disease consumes your body.*

Disgrace, disruption, and disease. Not pretty at all.

You need to protect your eyes. It's not the first look that gets you in trouble. It's the second look, going back for more. Job said, "*I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl*" (Job 31:1). Be careful what you allow through your eye-gate. Pornography is a \$2 billion industry that grows every year. Someone is not protecting their marriage.

You need to protect your steps. Don't get near the door of her house. Don't go out of your way to be flirtatious. Don't go out of your way to receive kind words from a person of the opposite sex. Paul was bold to say to young Pastor Timothy, "*Flee youthful lusts!*" (2 Timothy 2:22). Don't walk away... *run away!*

You need to protect your schedule and see that you provide adequate time to build up your marriage. Keep dating your spouse. Keep doing things together that you both enjoy. You also need to allow adequate time to rest, for when you are exhausted, you are more susceptible.

That's how you can protect your marriage—from within and from without.

Then the writer of these proverbs turns a corner, from defense to offense.

Question #2 — Am I Investing In My Marriage?

Are you investing in your marriage? I am big on premarital counseling. I'll tell you why. When I told my pastor that I had asked Martha to marry me and she agreed, he sat us both down in his office for premarital counseling... for 20 minutes (mostly about the order of the ceremony). I left his office excited about our upcoming wedding, but confused and apprehensive about our upcoming marriage. 20 minutes!

By default, those 20 minutes produced three years of challenge and stress in our marriage, because I didn't know what I was getting into, nor what would be required of me. We came within inches of calling it quits. But God...

We were on vacation in paradise (Hawaii), but our bliss turned to bickering about inconsequential things, and ended in a verbal standoff, to which Martha suggested, "Maybe we should get a divorce!" What she meant to say—I'm sure of it now—was, "Why don't you stop defending your righteousness and *listen* for a change?" But I was too full of myself to hear that.

But I heard the "D" word, and I was stunned. We didn't speak to each other for two days, while we returned home to our kids and our church. We put on like all was well while we visited with her Aunt and Uncle in Honolulu, and put on smiling faces while we went to church Sunday morning and evening. But by Monday morning, I couldn't bear it any more.

It was the pastor's day off, so I locked myself in the sanctuary to fast and pray for help and recovery. I spent the whole morning crying out to God to straighten out my wife, who had used the "D" word to my face. What kind of a Christian would do that?!? I confessed to him that I had my doubts whether she was really saved, like I was. But for all my arrogant tears and ardent praying, I got no response. God did not answer those prayers.

About mid-day I ran out of steam on that prayer track, and I began to pray about myself. What was I missing? What was I failing to see? Had I done something to bring on this catastrophe? I don't want you to think that this was a quick turnabout. It took me several hours to work my way to such self-examination. But when, at last, I did, a light began to dawn.

About 3:00pm I heard God's voice. It wasn't loud and booming, but gentle, as if He were sitting right next to me on the carpet. "Son, you're not single anymore," He said.

As I pondered His words, I saw an image of my family—I was standing next to Martha, with my arm around her shoulder, and in front were our two small children, Sarah and Peter. We were a family. Of course I wasn't single anymore! Why would God visit me to state the obvious? What was the point?

Confused, I resumed praying. About 45 minutes later, I heard His voice again. Just as clearly, He said, “Son, you’re not single anymore. You’re a family.” I mused, ever so briefly, that His grammar was incorrect, then asked, “What are you saying?!?”

Then the Holy Spirit led me on a journey through the Scriptures, in which He taught me this truth: Once married, I had to stop living like a single man. He showed me three ways in which I was doing it all wrong: 1) Stop thinking like a single man (as I had done all my life to that point), and be conscious of your responsibilities to your wife and children; 2) Stop making decisions like a single man, and include your wife and children in the process of reaching a decision that affected the family; 3) Stop praying like a single man, and pray like the priest of your household, always representing the entire family before God. I wasn’t single anymore; I was a family. It was the beginning of a gentle, but steady revolution in our marriage. It was the salvation of our marriage. And it is still the guiding light of my life with Martha, to be a godly family man.

So, when I became a pastor and was asked to officiate for a wedding, I determined that I could contribute more than 20 minutes to the well-being of that marriage. I crafted four one-hour sessions to see what wisdom the Bible offers for a man and a woman to become one—and no longer two. The materials have morphed over the years, but still follow that basic outline and purpose.

I want you to know that a marriage is not secured by saying your vows once, but by renewing them every single day. A great marriage is only built by renewing those promises and repeating those promises and living out those promises over and over and over.

Small but faithful investments will reap big rewards in marriage, just like they will in your financial life. It’s not the big things that make a marriage great; it’s those small things that are consistently repeated.

God brings two people together and He makes them one. He binds us together in the Spirit and then we have the opportunity, each day, to add glue to the bond by our small investments of loving faithfulness. And if we don’t, there will be consequences. If we don’t, the marriage begins to pull apart, the marriage begins to unravel.

Then comes the grief and regret of Proverbs 5:12-14.

Proverbs 5:12-14

¹² You will say, “How I hated discipline! If only I had not ignored all the warnings! ¹³ Oh, why didn’t I listen to my teachers? Why didn’t I pay attention to my instructors? ¹⁴ I have come to the brink of utter ruin, and now I must face public disgrace.”

Martha and I both hold very responsible positions and have busy schedules, but we continue to invest in each other and in our marriage, carving out time, however brief, to talk, to serve,

to work, and to play together. Every once in awhile, we manage to get away just to hang out and catch up (away from telephones and computers), and remember why we fell in love with each other to begin with, and why it's deeper after 40 years.

We want you to be able to say that you are protecting your marriage, investing in your marriage, so that your marriage can be all that God wants it to be.

There are multiple ways that you can invest in your marriage. You can make spiritual investments, by being in church together, by praying and worshipping together, and by serving others together.

You can also invest in each other physically. Now, people have different levels of need for physical touch. Some love to have their back rubbed, others are too ticklish to stand it, and still others cringe when touched. It's unwise to read too much into that; just take each other as you are and help each other understand your differing needs, so that you can strike a balance that is respectful and caring. That said, frequent and appropriate touches and hugs and kisses are always a strong investment in marital well-being.

You must also invest in one another emotionally—talking about your feelings, sharing facts and frustrations, expressing dreams and concerns, opinions and desires.

May I recommend a book to you? It's called Sacred Marriage, by Gary Thomas. The subtitle is revealing: "What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy." (You can buy the Kindle version for only \$2.99. Or, you can sign up with the church for RightNow Media and view a six-session study for free.) Thomas suggests a prayer that married couples should pray every day: "Lord, how can I love my spouse today like he/she has never been loved and never will be loved by anyone else?" If you pray that prayer on a regular basis, you will be amazed at how God will speak to you about practical little things that you can do to make significant investments in your marriage.

Question #3 — Am I Enjoying My Marriage?

Someone said, Every marriage has three rings: engagement ring, wedding ring, and suffering. There seem to be no end of sitcoms and jokes about how we have to suffer through marriage. But that's not God's plan at all. God's plan is for you to enjoy your marriage, for you to be able to enjoy one another, to enjoy your children, and to enjoy your grandchildren. Someone has said that it is not a lack of love that leads to unhappiness in marriage, but a lack of friendship.

Do you make date nights, for example? Do you plan time to be together for little getaways? Do you celebrate the small, but wonderful, things in marriage? Have you taken time to count your marriage blessings?

Enjoy your marriage emotionally. Enjoy it spiritually. Enjoy it physically. This final passage has been rated PG-13, but from God's perspective, it's just the ordinary stuff of life.

Proverbs 5:15-20

¹⁵ Drink water from your own well—share your love only with your wife. ¹⁶ Why spill the water of your springs in the streets, having sex with just anyone? ¹⁷ You should reserve it for yourselves. Never share it with strangers.

¹⁸ Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. ¹⁹ She is a loving deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love. ²⁰ Why be captivated, my son, by an immoral woman, or fondle the breasts of a promiscuous woman?

Do you want to foolproof your marriage? Then, protect it, invest in it, and enjoy it. An important part of that process is knowing and observing the boundaries of your marriage covenant.

Men, share your love only with your wife. That's the boundary, the limit. Beyond that is the Forbidden Zone.

But on the positive side of that same boundary, God says within the sanctity and faithfulness of marriage, share your love generously, don't hold back. Enjoy it together.

One final caveat: You will not enjoy your marriage perpetually, if you pin all your hopes for fulfillment on your spouse. (Sexual fulfillment, yes, but not overall life fulfillment.) It is not up to your spouse to make you happy, to banish all your fears, or to provide everything that you need. Those are God-sized tasks that no human can continuously fulfill.

You see, there can be only one Number One in your life. And that chair can only be occupied properly by God Himself. Your spouse is part of God's plan for your happiness, fulfillment, and support, but he or she cannot be your primary source. If you look to him or her in that way, you make your spouse an idol, you put your spouse in the place of God.

When God is in the center and pinnacle of a relationship, as He should be, and each person in the relationship aims at growing closer to Him, they will, at the same time, grow closer to one another. If, on the other hand, they concentrate on growing closer to each other, ignoring God to some degree, He will remain distant, and their pursuit of happiness together will be thwarted.

Ephesians 5:31-33

"As the Scriptures say, a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife and the two are united into one. This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of how Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

So, are you prepared to make some fresh decisions today? Are you prepared to make God first and foremost in your marriage? Tell Him so. Even if you have already invited Him to be the Lord and Savior of your heart, now invite Him to be the Lord of your marriage.

Decide today to protect your marriage. Choose today to invest in your marriage. Make up your mind to enjoy your marriage.

Perhaps you're ready to pray with me. You can pray something like this:

"God, I want my marriage to be all that You want it to be. Make me into the husband or wife I need to be. God, I want to protect my marriage. Show me the gaps in the hedge around our home. God, show me how to invest in my marriage. Teach me new ways to show your love to my spouse. God, help me to enjoy my marriage, and be a best friend to my spouse. Remind me to carve out time for us, not just for me. Most of all, Lord, protect us from the snares of the enemy that lure us beyond the boundaries You have set for us, or that threaten to isolate us from one another within our own home. I put my trust in Jesus Christ who has made us one, and no longer two. May the joy of the Lord fill our hearts and home. Amen."

If you prayed such a prayer with me today, I want you to let me know. Give me a call, or send me an email. Let me know that you've put your heart and your home in Jesus' hands.