

SERIES: RELATIONSHIPS MATTERS

Part 2: Great Relationships Get The Little Things Right

The biblical goal of relationships is to love your neighbor by doing good for them and to help align the relationship to God's purposes for each other. In marriage it is to learn to take action on the behalf of your spouse that will help them to become more like Jesus. Obviously, that cannot be done without a personal relationship with Jesus and His Holy Spirit to empower us to be the person we were created to be in marriage.

God wants us all to have good relationships, friendships and marriages. It is a fantasy to think we can have perfect anything. That is our pride usurping itself.

I like to encourage a spouse who is frustrated that their spouse isn't perfect to understand that it is impossible to be perfect. They are sinful. They're flawed. However, we can be good spouses, good parents, and good friends. The goal is not perfection but progress.

This morning I want to give you six action steps every one of us here in this room and those who listen to the cd or the download from our website can take to have a good relationship, friendship and a good marriage by taking care of these six little things.

The phrase these six little things reminds me of a story I heard recently about a man who said to his wife, “When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you handle your anger so amazingly well?” His wife responds, “I just clean the toilet.” “How does that help?” he asks. “I use your toothbrush,” she responded.

There was another couple who had been debating the purchase of a new car for weeks. He wanted a new truck. She wanted a fast little sports like car so she could zip through traffic and around town. He would probably have settled on any beat-up old truck, but everything she seemed to like was out of their price range.

Look she said, I want something that does from 0-200 in 4 seconds or less. And my birthday is coming up. Just surprise me.” So for her birthday, he bought her a brand new bathroom scale.

Simone Signoret has written **“Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years.”** I want us to look at six activities that are the process of sowing the thousands of tiny threads that cause marriages to experience the intimacy and connection they long for. The threads that cause relationships and friendship to grow strong and connected to each other.

In her book, **For Better: How the Surprising Science of Happy Couples Can Help Your Marriage Succeed**, Tara

Parker Pope writes, “What marital science teaches us is that improving a marriage (or a friendship) doesn’t require sweeping changes. Couples in good marriages get the little things right.... The broad trends of marriage and divorce give us reason to be hopeful. Divorce is getting less common, couples are waiting longer to get married, and once a man and a woman do finally decide to marry, marriage and divorce statistics clearly show that the odds of staying married are in their favor.”

Let’s look at the six actions to take to keep your marriage, friendships and relationships strong.

I. Celebrate the good

“Good people enjoy the positive results of their words but those who are treacherous crave violence.” Proverbs 13:2

**“The good acquire a taste for helpful conversation; bullies push and shove their way through life.” Proverbs 13:2
(MSG)**

In his epic poem, “Paradise Lost,” John Milton writes:

“Good, the more communicated, more abundant grows.”
The Bible says good people enjoy the positive results of their words because they focus on having helpful, beneficial and uplifting conversations with their spouses, family and friends. Pope writes the marital research shows that **couples who regularly celebrate the good times have higher levels of commitment, intimacy, trust, and relationship**

satisfaction. I love how scientific research is regularly affirming what God has told us about marriage and relationships thousands of years ago.

A wise couple, a smart friend, a discerning employer and leader will capitalize on the positive events in their lives. In simple terms this truth means that you need to make a big deal out of the good moments of your marriage. Regardless of how negative you might feel right now about your spouse, family or life, there are good things happening in your life. They might seem very small to you, but as the Bible says a good person acquires the taste for helpful, uplifting positive conversation.

Things to look for to celebrate: Did your spouse's meeting go well? Have they achieved one of the goals they have set for 2018: THE YEAR OF BREAKTHROUGH? Where have they had a spiritual victory? A prayer answered? Success in reading the Bible consistently for 2 days, 3 days or whatever the truth is? Has been consistently attending Sunday services? Has joined up and been attending a small group? Is growing in their ability to worship God when we gather and when they are alone? Where have they had an emotional victory? They're telling the truth more often? They are setting boundaries for themselves and learning to say no and yes when appropriate? They are learning to control their thought life, and they are becoming more positive, and it is causing depression, disappointment and despair to diminish? What relational victories? One of the women of our church just spent some time with a friend where their friendship was

strained and reconciliation is happening. What physical victories have they had? Are they changing their diet, and because of it they have lost some pounds, they are actually feeling better? You get the point. Look for the smallest victories, growth points and celebrate them.

One of the major reasons we won't celebrate the small things is because we're waiting for sweeping changes to happen before we celebrate and praise our spouse or friend. That is inappropriate thinking. Big changes happen one small change at a time. Good marriages, good friendships and relationships celebrate the good. The lesson is it's not enough that you take pride in your spouse's or friend's accomplishments, you must show it. Celebrate the small, good things that happen every day. It will boost the health of your marriage and relationships.

II. Learn relationship math

Ephesians 4:29 says, **“Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.”**

Notice what the Bible says, let everything you say be good and helpful. Why would God instruct us to watch and evaluate every word we speak? Because He knows the damage that negative, harsh, angry words have.

Again marital science confirms the truth of this scripture. Dr. Gottman, one of the most famous Marriage and Family researchers and counselors videotaped couples in

conversation, and he would catalog every nice or negative thing a couple did or said during their discussion. Things like laughing, touching, smiling, or paying a compliment were described as positive interactions. They also tracked the number of not-so-nice moments—eye rolling, sneers, criticism, defensiveness, anger, and withdrawal.

As the researchers studied the data, a striking pattern emerged. In stable, good marriages, relationships, and friendships, there are at least 5 times more positive interactions than negative ones. When the ratio starts to dip, the marriage is at a higher risk for divorce. Here is where it becomes real practical. Just saying, “I’m sorry,” after bad behavior isn’t enough. For every snide comment or negative outburst in a marriage, a person needs to ramp up the positives so the good-to-bad ration doesn't fall to a risky level.

Marriages that are solid and they last do this naturally. They have internalized these skills and habits. The words they speak are positive. “You look nice today, Honey.” “That color looks good on you.” “Thanks for all the effort you go to in making these nutritious healthy meals.” “You’re such a great mom.” “You’re such a great dad.” They give each other positive touch. It might be a pat on the hand or back, a hug, a tousle of the hair, a kiss for no reason.

The lesson here is do the marriage and relational math. For some of us who focus on the negative in ourselves and in our friends or spouses, when you do make a commitment to

yourself that you're going to do at least five positive things for your spouse to make up for your criticism, negative comments or actions, positive words and gestures go a long way to build up your love account for the inevitable negative times that will come. The point is to become an avid fan of investing in your love bank with your spouse, children and friends.

III. Hold your standards high

Please read with me Philippians 4:8, “**Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.**” Why would the Bible tell us to fix our thoughts on these virtues? Because what you think on consistently is what you will become and what you will have in your life. Here is the power of making these commitments. You are what you yield to, and you become what you are committed to.

Again relationship and marital research confirms this powerful truth. This research is very important. It is true that too many friends and spouses will demand more of the relationship than is helpful at times, but more recent research shows that high standards are a good thing. Dr. Baucom from the University of North Carolina found that people, who have high standards who really want to be treated well and who want romance and passion for their marriage, end up getting that kind of marriage. Men and women with low standards,

who don't expect good treatment, communication, or romance, end up in relationships that don't offer those things.

What I'm about to say is very important in setting high standards for your marriage and relationships. God created us to experience oneness in marriage. In order for oneness to happen in marriage it requires two complete people. The Bible defines a complete person as a mature person.

Townsend and Cloud write, **“A complete person is able to do all the things that adult life and relationship requires: give love and receive love, be independent and self-sufficient, live out values honestly, be responsible, have self confidence, deal with problems and failures, live out their talents, and have a life. If two people who marry are complete, the oneness they establish will be complete. To the degree that either is less than complete as a person, the oneness will suffer under the strain of that incompleteness. The incomplete partner's longing for completeness will take precedence over what he or she is able to give to the relationship, and the relationship will suffer.”** This is one of the best definitions of codependency I have ever read and they never use the term. Often times a person who fills incomplete will look or act as if they are the most committed to the relationship, but what really is happening is that their immaturity is what is impacting the relationship, and they will most often than not blame the other person. Marriage is about complementing each other and not completing. Townsend and Cloud write, **“Marriage was not designed to complete a person. It was designed for two complete people to enter into and form something**

different than either of them is on his or her own. It was designed, not to make you a whole person, but to give your wholeness a new range of experience.”

So it is as we continue to grow and mature in our own personal sense of completeness that you can have standards for your relationship and see them fulfilled.

IV. Stay in touch with family and friends

1 Timothy 5:1-2, “Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him respectfully as you would to your own father. Talk to younger men as you would to your own brothers. ²Treat older women as you would your mother, and treat younger women with all purity as you would your own sisters.”

As a culture we have become way too privatized. We don't want our family, friends and CVCHURCH family to know if we're struggling. Throughout history, family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers have been important sources of social, personal, and financial support to married couples. But research has shown that today, many people view their husband or wife as the primary person they turn to for support. Many couples even believe that outsiders can interfere with their marital bond, and they distance themselves from close outside relationships.

Sociologists Naomi Gerstel of the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Natalia Sarkisian at Boston

College have found that married people have fewer ties to relatives than people who aren't married. They are less likely to visit or call their parents and other family members, compared to relatives who are single. Marriage can also cut a couple's ties to the larger community. Married people are less likely to socialize with neighbors or help out their friends.

Marriage Historian Stephanie Coontz writes, **“Today we expect much more intimacy and support from our partners than in the past, but much less from everyone else. This puts a huge strain on the institution of marriage. We often overload marriage by asking our partner to satisfy more need than any one individual can possibly meet.”** This is profound. This ties in famously with what I have read to you from Townsend and Cloud. The best way to improve your relationship, friendship and marriage is to focus on your own maturity to grow spiritually, emotionally, relationally, physically, vocationally, intellectually, and financially. Stop focusing on your spouse and focus on your maturity, and include your small group, friends and family. Two of the greatest advocates for our marriage were my father and my brother-in-law Paul Berg. They both have died. I have had to find other men who can support and affirm my marriage and my role as a husband and father.

V. Steward your sexuality whether you're single or married

1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 says, **“God’s will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin. ⁴Then each of you will control your own body and live in holiness and honor—⁵not in lustful passion like the nonbelievers who do not know God and His ways. ⁶Never harm or cheat a Christian brother or sister in this matter by violating his wife or her husband, for the Lord avenges all such sins, as we have solemnly warned you before.”**

1 Corinthians 7:3-5, **“The husband should fulfill his wife’s sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband’s needs. ⁴The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife. ⁵Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won’t be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”** What is Paul saying? He is saying there is to be mutuality sexually in marriage. You can see where each spouse must be growing in their own maturity and sense of completeness. You can demand that your spouse fulfill your needs, but it isn’t going to work unless each spouse takes their relationship with Jesus seriously. There are real fighting words here in this passage. The husband and wife are to fill each other’s needs. They are to give their bodies to their spouse for their pleasure. Paul argues that meeting each other’s needs is important so Satan won’t tempt you because of lack of self control. That is the spiritual side of our sexuality.

On the physiological and biological side of our sexuality, did you know that the simple act of intercourse whether you're in the mood or not, harnesses your body's brain chemistry, unleashing the chemicals vasopressin and oxytocin. There are powerful bonding chemicals. Experts tell the low-desire couple to have sex even if they don't want to. After about five minutes of going through the motions, sexual activity will release the bonding chemical and you are likely to even start enjoying the process.

One woman tells of her experience where after she was done having children their marriage became sexless. She had lost interest and the couple was talking divorce. For those of us who are older, did you know that the studies on human sexuality demonstrate that there are so many positive physical benefits from heart health, to brain and emotional health that we were created to be sexual with our spouse until we die? We forfeit so much of God's purposes and plans for our marriages when we allow ourselves to stop this important aspect of our relationship with our spouse.

This woman was sternly told that if she wanted to save her marriage, she needed to start having sex twice a week with her husband whether she wanted to or not. "I hate this advice," she says. "What about my needs? But I followed it anyway. I forced myself, and you know what? I loved it, he loved it, and our marriage loved it."

If you need help, get the help you need. I am good in this area, and if you want to talk with me it would be my privilege. If you want to seek professional counseling, do so. If you have friends that can help you, and you trust them to keep things confidential, talk to them.

For loss of desire you might need to go get a physical and have your hormonal levels checked. If you are a resentful, angry and unforgiving person that can impact your desire towards your spouse. The Bible says you're giving satan a foothold and advantage in your marriage if you allow this aspect of your marriage to diminish. Good marriages, strong marriage pay attention to this area of their lives.

VI. Engage on a regular date day or night

1 Corinthians 7:33-34, **“A married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife....^{34b} But a married woman has to think about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband.”**

Most studies of love and marriage show that the decline of romantic love over time is inevitable. Love researchers have come up with a way for long-married couples to rekindle their early feelings of romance. Here's the prescription: Embark on a regular date day or night, but reinvent it to include new and unusual experiences. The advice is based in brain science. New experiences activate the brain's reward system, flooding it with the brain chemical dopamine and norepinephrine. These are the same brain circuits that are

ignited in early romantic love, a time of exhilaration and obsessive thoughts about a new partner.

The key is to do some new things that you don't typically do: Attend concerts or plays, skiing, hiking, ballroom dancing or going to new places. This is part of our responsibility as marrieds to do those things that are pleasing to our spouses so that our romantic fires are tended and continual intimacy and bonding are taking place.

Pray.