

Marriage—A Real Killer

By Paul Anderson

My philosophy of marriage changed after I entered into the holy estate of matrimony. You've heard some lofty ideals regarding marriage. I used to think that it involved finding someone with whom you were compatible so you could live the rest of your life happily ever after. Now I think differently. The purpose of marriage, simply put, is to kill you. The same God who engineered the death of His Son is planning your death as well, and marriage serves His purpose.

I found this out one evening years ago when Karen called to let me know that she was coming home late and asked me if I would cook. I was disappointed, but I resolved to respond honorably. As soon as I made that decision, I felt like Mother Teresa, Saint Francis and Billy Graham all wrapped into one. What a gift I was to Karen. She was fortunate to marry someone so agreeable, so flexible, so godly. I expected to enjoy an evening of saintliness. But as the moments ticked off, so did I. The turkey was not the only thing cooking in the kitchen. I rehearsed the injustice of the situation in my mind. I had worked all day, and now I was putting out in the evening as well. She came home even later than anticipated, and by the time she arrived, all sainthood had gone out the kitchen window.

Many couples are surprised to find that marriage looms as a greater test than they had imagined. That's because marriage necessitates dying. Two people mean two different ideas, two different preferences, two different schedules, two different ways of doing simple things. When the Bible says that "the two shall become one," that means more than physical oneness. It involves thinking together, going places together, working out the finances together. You can't buy whatever you want, and you can't go to both New Mexico and New Hampshire on your vacation. You now pool your resources, ideas, and schedules to live as one. Most couples find that task daunting. Like the cowboy in the saloon who has just been shot, we do some damage (kicking over tables, throwing glasses) before we lie down and die.

We have ways to keep from dying, like trying to prove that we are not wrong, too insecure to be kind rather than right. Our pride is showing. Or we give partial forgiveness, holding back in case we are hurt again. Jesus, on the other hand, died quickly. Pilate was surprised that He was already dead when a request came for His body. Jesus had chosen to lay down His life, which is what He calls us to do. And when He died, He held no bitterness in His spirit.

I don't believe in pre-marital counseling as much as I used to, because many couples don't think what is being shared applies to them. (At least I didn't.) I'd rather

invest three hours in a couple after six months of matrimony than ten hours before, because they now realize that marriage is not a piece of (wedding) cake. They don't come in all google-eyes. They are a bit dazed, like the deer in the headlights. They are wondering, "Who is this person I married? Not quite the prince I thought he was. He sure has strong opinions. My, he's stubborn. I never saw that when we were dating. He must have kept it from me." Quirks come out of hiding when you share a bed, a bathroom, and a bank account. Nothing like reality to upgrade the effectiveness of counseling, and like my sister Debra, who enjoys a good marriage, said recently to her siblings, "Every couple needs counseling." Some people think, "Most marriages are not as bad as ours." It can come as relief to know that every marriage requires that two people die—and that remains a difficult assignment.

We don't really know our mate before marriage because we are guarded. We have probably not yet learned to exercise vulnerability. And—we don't really know ourselves. When my father-in-law was preparing to retire, he wanted to take a class being offered on how to go about it. He was a bit annoyed that they would not permit him to sign up until he was already retired. Once he got there, he knew why. He found retirement much harder than he had imagined, not the easy transition he had anticipated. He didn't know himself, nor did he anticipate the struggles ahead of him.

The cross stands at the center of the Christian life. Crosses are for dying on more than for wearing. Jesus accepted His cross, but He told us that we must embrace ours as well. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). St. Paul said, "I die daily." That must happen in a marriage for two people to become one.

Seeking happiness arises as the option to dying. The Declaration of Independence says that we possess the inalienable right of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." People who want to live independently rather than as one choose happiness as the purpose of marriage. The goal of marriage is to make you holy, not happy. Happiness surfaces as a by-product of holiness. Jesus was the happiest person that ever lived because He was the holiest. We are told, "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Hebrews 1:9). Happiness came not by way of inalienable right but by righteousness. Jesus never made a decision based on whether it would make Him happy, because He gave up all personal rights when He left heaven. Jesus' mission statement was simple: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:27). If we follow Jesus, we live—to die. And in dying, we give life to others. Jesus died to sanctify His bride (Eph. 5:26). What if we accomplished the same in our marriages?!

As we fall in love, we can't imagine living apart from each other, and we somehow expect marriage to be endless bliss. At least it will be different from some of the marriages we know about. We anticipate being treated as a king or a queen. But we discover that we must die to ourselves for that to happen, die to our opinions, to our preferences—and dying is never easy. It wasn't for Jesus, and it won't be for us. Jesus endured the cross; He didn't enjoy it. Don't expect dying to be fun—ever. Write down your expectations of marriage and especially of your Beloved before you get married, like being cared for, listened to, appreciated—then burn them! Unfulfilled expectations are the number one reason for divorce. You can solve that—don't have any. Easier said than pulled off, but if you do, you will have an unoffendable heart—and a powerful marriage!

I shared about dying recently at a reception of a couple who had been married for one month. I asked them at the end of my talk what issues they have discovered that they had to die to. The wife responded first: "When I was hurt, I did what girls do—I cried. When Steve didn't come into the bedroom, I cried more—and louder. Still he didn't come. Finally I went to where he was—and found out that he was hurt as much as I, that he needed comfort just as I did. I needed to die to my need so I could comfort him." What if all couples could die to their own needs like that?! Dying means something different to each person. For Jesus it meant a Roman cross. For a passive person it might mean not backing down. For one given to anger it could mean keeping your mouth shut. For one full of self-pity, it is learning to feel with others.

Happiness in marriage doesn't come by pursuing it but by dying so you can serve your partner. The option is to choose happiness—and live apart, either in the same house or finally divorcing. I hear it all the time: "Well, I need to be happy, too." What they sometimes mean is, "I need to do as I please," which may include breaking the vows. If you have chosen happiness as a higher goal than holiness, you are most likely bypassing Biblical standards of sexual morality—and you are hard to live with. You have embraced unfulfilled expectations in your marriage, making you unhappy with your mate and with yourself.

All men and many women struggle to walk in purity in their marriage. If you choose happiness as your right, get ready to lose that battle. You will go to the edge, entertain an affair, or otherwise compromise the values that you never considered breaking. I once went to the home of a couple in which the wife had just found out that her husband had been seeing another woman. I asked the husband what he really looked for in the marriage. He responded, "I want her to be happy." "Then," I answered, "start dying to yourself and start serving her." Unfortunately, he chose to die to her needs and to live to satisfy himself, escalating the pain in her heart

and in God's. He espoused the philosophy that he had the right to be happy, which he played out by going beyond marriage to find it. He knew better, but that didn't keep him at home. In effect, he declared his independence.

Come on, you don't need to be happy. But, you do need to be holy. "Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). We must learn to separate needs from desires, or we'll get in trouble. Happiness is not a requirement for living out the Christian life—holiness is!

If I met with a couple for a 1,000-mile checkup, or even a couple considering divorce, I would ask these two questions:
In what areas do you (not your partner) need to die to yourself for this marriage to work?
Are you willing to do that, beginning now?

I had hoped to ask these questions of two friends on the verge of separating. But he told me, "I'd rather have you as my friend than as my counselor," and he declined my offer. Sadly, they divorced, and we've seen almost nothing of either one since.

Living with Christ is all about dying. Paul said it plainly, "Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (2 Cor. 4:12). What a wonderful gift to give to our neighbor or our sister in Christ—or our spouse! When we die, they live. And so do we. What a dead-icated marriage!

When I shared this word, the strongest two responses came from single people. That is because living is about dying. But maybe you're thinking, "Okay, I'll be the victim. I've played that role plenty of times. I'll die to my plans, my dreams. Hit me again." If so, you are believing that power comes from domination, from the guy on top of the heap. Once again, look at the cross. Christ at His weakest was God at His strongest. As Paul said, "The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (I Cor. 1:25). The power of surrender beats the power of force—every time. The victim is the victor. The One on the cross is reigning. It was true for Jesus, and it will be true for you—in your marriage, in your life. So go ahead—try dying!

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