

## INTRODUCTION

At one time the “typical” family consisted of a husband who worked, a wife who was a full-time mom and two kids. Is that kind of family becoming an endangered species? Some reports seem to indicate it is true. The results of the 2000 Census revealed that about four out of ten American families with children under the age of 18 are single parent families. (compared to 13% of families in 1970) Six out of ten children under the age of 18 at one point will live in a single-parent family; this is the age of the absentee or part-time dad, because single moms head nine out of ten single-parent families.

In spite of some of these reports, I am optimistic about the future of the family. Not too many years ago, the buffalo, whooping crane, and the humpback whale were on the endangered species list; today they are thriving. I think the Family is on the verge of making a comeback. I read an article this week in *USA Today* that said since 9/11 more people in America are realizing the importance of their families. Most family studies over the past 25 years have focused on family problems by analyzing dysfunctional families. Only a few studies have been conducted to determine what factors contribute to produce healthy families.

Dr. Nick Stinnett, Chairman of the Department of Human Development and Family at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln undertook such a study several years ago. He interviewed 3,000 strong families: single parent families, black families, white families, and ethnic families. The only criterion was that each of these families rated themselves high in marriage satisfaction and parent-child relationships. The project was not limited to Christian families. Dr. Stinnett found good families share six common qualities. The family members: (1) Are committed to the family; (2) Spend time together; (3) Have good family communication; (4) Express appreciation to each other; (5) Have a spiritual commitment; and (6) Are able to solve problems in a crisis. (Nick Stinnett, *Family Building: Six Qualities of a Strong Family*, p. 38)

Over the next four weeks I will be talking about some of these factors, which contribute to strengthening families. All families begin with a husband and a wife, so today I want to address marriage. You’ve heard that America has the leading divorce rate in the world. Did you also know we lead the world in the marriage rate also? Americans believe in marriage. 96% of all Americans will be married at some time. Even 80% of those who go through divorce will remarry. Marriage is an important institution in our country.

God has a lot to say about marriage in His Word. Let’s read His words in Malachi 2:

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

“I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

In Malachi we find a series of “complaints” God brings against sinful human behavior. He addressed marriage and His words ring true today. Good marriages don’t happen accidentally. Just because you have a marriage license doesn’t mean you have a good marriage, any more than having a fishing license insures you will catch fish. It just gives you the legal right to try!

Before I share this message I must issue a caveat: I don’t claim to be an expert on marriage. I don’t even consider myself to be a very good husband. I am constantly trying to improve. However, I can say that outside my relationship with Jesus Christ, my relationship to Cindy is the most important in my life. Our anniversary is June 1, so in three weeks, Cindy and I will have been happily married for 10 years—of course we’ve been married for a total of 28 years—but Cindy claims that about 10 of the 28 have been relatively happy! We have a strange and wonderful relationship: I’m strange and Cindy is wonderful. In 28 years, we’ve never had an argument, but we have had some serious discussions that made the neighbors next door call to see if everything was okay. I’m far from a perfect husband. Once when I did something stupid, Cindy wrote me a note that read, “Dear David, I hate you. Love, Cindy.” So, I’m no expert on marriage, but I’m trying to learn to be a better husband!

This message is entitled “How to Build a 3-D Marriage.” If you want to build a better marriage here are three things you can do. They all start with a “D,” so I call it a 3-D marriage:

## **I. DIALOGUE DAILY**

It’s important for you and your spouse to spend quality time talking every day. Good communication is the mark of a healthy marriage. A breakdown of communication will cause problems. I heard a funny story about a couple who was having communication problems, so the husband was giving his wife the “silent treatment.” She joined in the game, so they spent several days without speaking to each other. The husband was leaving the next morning on a business trip and needed his wife to wake him up at 5 a.m. so he could catch his early flight. Not wanting to be the first to say, “I’m sorry” and end the silence, he wrote his wife a note that said, “Wake me up at 5 a.m. to catch a flight.”

The next morning he woke up and discovered that it was 8 a.m.—he had missed his flight. He was furious. He was about to go look for his wife to fuss at her when he noticed a note on his bedside table. The note said, “It’s 5 a.m.—Wake up!” That’s what I call a breakdown in communication!

Here’s how to improve your marital communication:

### **1. Designate a “talking” time and place**

One of the biggest obstacles to good communication is not finding the *time* to talk. You will never *find* the time; you must *create* the time. One of my favorite times of the day is when I get home in the afternoon. Cindy and I go out and sit on our back porch underneath our arbor in a

wooden swing. We just sit and rock and talk for a few minutes before supper. It's a good time to find out about each other's day and to talk about a variety of subjects. That's our "talking place." If you don't have a talking time and place, why don't you designate one?

Stuart Briscoe says good communication is hard work, especially for men, because we are conversationally challenged. Dr. Briscoe says the four hardest statements to make in marriage are: (1) I was wrong; (2) I'm sorry; (3) I don't know; and (4) I need help. If you use those four statements regularly with your mate, then you are effectively communicating with your spouse. Ogden Nash wrote a little poem about marriage: "To keep your marriage brimming / With love in your loving cup / Whenever you're wrong, admit it / Whenever you're right, shut up!"

Another tip is:

## **2. Be creative in your conversation topics**

If you aren't careful, your marriage communication can become boring and stale. If you ask the same questions and talk about the same topics over and over again, communication will suffer. If you only talk about things like, "What do you want to do for supper?" Or "What's on TV tonight?" you'll soon grow weary and bored with your conversations. The key is to keep the dialogue fresh and innovative.

Your goal in marriage dialogue should be that of Ephesians 4:29: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs." Use your words to build up your mate, not tear him or her down. A key skill in marriage communication is the ability to be a good listener. So many times, we have a dialogue with our mate and we aren't really listening, we are just waiting for them to pause or take a breath so we can jump in and have our say. Husbands, what your wife needs from you is a listening ear. Guys, when your wife shares a frustration or problem with you, she is looking for your concern and understanding, not a fix to her problem. Don't try to play "Mr. Fix-it." Just listen and empathize with her. She wants your arms, not your mouth. The typical conversation sounds like this: A woman says to her husband, "I had a terrible day at work today." Her husband says around his newspaper. "You say that all the time, why don't you just quit?" She says, "I didn't say I wanted to quit, I said I just had a terrible day!" He counters with, "Then why did you ask my opinion in the first place?" She says, "I didn't ask you opinion, I was just making a statement. Oh, just forget it!" The husband resumes reading his paper thinking, "Women sure are hard to figure out."

Ephesians 4:29 says to "build up" your mate with your words. A good way to do that is constantly compliment your mate. Actively look for ways to express admiration to your mate. We all want to "receive compliments" but in marriage it is "more blessed to give than to receive" admiration. Ladies, most of you realize the tough macho image your husband projects is just a facade. Underneath, he is an insecure little boy. He has a fragile male ego, and you are wise if you know how to massage his ego. It's easy for wives to become hypercritical, especially since you are in to noticing "details" more than men. Your husband really may not even notice those dirty socks he leaves on the floor, and you think he put them there just to make you mad. Ladies, look for the positive things about your husband and constantly reinforce those qualities. Don't be

like the wife who said to her husband, "I married you for your brains...it's the little things that count!"

Guys, your wife wants to hear sweet talk from you. Have you ever noticed how guys greet each other? I can meet with some of my golf buddies and I can say, "Hello, ugly, who let you out of the sewer?" He can say back to me, "How'z it goin', dirt bag?" When two guys talk to each other like that they are pretty good friends—fellas, don't talk to your wife like that! Women love to hear sweet words. That's why sometimes you'll find a beautiful woman married to a really ugly man: he knew how to sweet talk her!

The first D is to dialogue daily. Next, if you want to build a healthy 3-D marriage, you must:

## II. DATE REGULARLY

When you first met your future spouse, you probably went on what we call "dates." These are times you have pre-arranged to be together to do things like go to a movie, eat dinner, or have a picnic together. The main purpose of a "date" is to spend time with each other. Do you remember how nice you were to each other on dates when you were "courting?" You anticipated the date with excitement and you dressed up nice and were on your best behavior. That's the same way you ought to be with each other *after* you get married! Before you were married, dating was FUN—and marriage ought to keep continue to be fun, too. The Bible says, "May you rejoice in the wife of your youth ... may you ever be captivated by her love." (Proverbs 5:18-19) Here are a couple of dating tips:

### 1. Schedule it—don't give your mate your leftovers!

That's what the word "date" literally means. It's a day and time on your schedule where you have both agreed to get together for some personal time. If you don't put your dates down on your calendar or in your Palm Pilot, other people with their demands will fill up your time, and you'll find the only time you have to give to your mate is your leftover time.

I believe you should try to go out on a date with your mate at least once a week. Right now, Sunday nights are "date night" for Cindy and me. After church on Sunday nights we try to go to a restaurant alone, just the two of us. It's gives us a regular time to look forward to being with each other. Some couples bowl, others bike, others may hike. But whatever it is you like to do, be sure to carve out time in your schedule to do it at least once a week. A second suggestion is:

### 2. Go away together—don't take the kids!

Don't get me wrong, family vacations are *very* important and you should take as many of them as you can. However, it's also important for husbands and wives to go away together—just the two of you.

One of the biggest problems 40- and 50-somethings face is when their kids grow up and are gone, they look at their mate and say, "Who are you?" They have spent the last 20 to 30 years

pouring their lives into their children, and haven't taken time to cultivate their marriage relationship. It's scary how many divorces occur among couples after their children leave home.

The very first institution God created was marriage: it was before children, it was before nations, and it was before the church. I think a relationship between a husband and wife should be the most important human relationship on earth. Of course, you love your kids in a different way, but guys, your first love should not be your kids—it should be your wife. And moms, even on this Mother's Day when we think about the unique love a mother has for her children, your first and finest love and affection should be directed at your husband.

When my dad was 55 he was dying of cancer in a hospital in Mobile, Alabama. A few weeks before he died, I was alone with him in the hospital room, and he started to impart some final fatherly wisdom to me. He said, “Son, your mother and I had always planned on traveling together after we both retired. We have saved money to do that, but it looks like I've made a miscalculation. So, don't wait to take trips with your wife and children. And don't ever be afraid to spend money to make memories.” I've tried to follow my dad's advice. Since that time, Cindy and I have always tried to go off together and spend time alone. We left our girls with grandparents or friends and had our own marriage enrichment retreats. Alabama has some great state parks. When our girls were little, we generally went away during the first week in December to Guntersville State Park on Lake Guntersville. We stayed in the large hotel-like lodge, and ate in the restaurant. Because the parks were subsidized by state funds, they opened whether they had many guests or not. The hotel rooms were only about \$30.

We loved to go during the first week in December because the beautiful Christmas decorations were already up, and the place was deserted. There were several years when we were the only couple staying in the lodge designed to host 300 guests. It had a beautiful restaurant that could seat over 200 and we would be the only couple eating dinner, being served by the entire staff. We fantasized that I had rented the entire lodge just for our stay, and we could get up and dance to the piped in music as if we owned the place. We would walk through the trails and see dozens of deer—it was great! I don't think I could have survived the pastorate without those times with Cindy.

It has always been our goal to date weekly and to depart quarterly. Now, you may not be able to go away for a few days, but even an overnight trip to Dallas, or a trip to a Bed and Breakfast in Jefferson can count as one of your departures. But don't let time slip away; schedule those times together. No matter how long you have been married, keep on dating your mate! The final and most important D is:

### **III. DEVOTED CONTINUALLY**

If you want to have a better marriage you both must be devoted continually to each other. Marriage is a terminal relationship—not because it will kill you—but because it is designed to be in effect until one of the partners dies. It is to be a permanent relationship. We all know people who terminated their marriage before one of the partners died: they got a divorce. Many of you listening to me have gone through the pain and agony of divorce. I've even heard people say, “It was God's will for me to get a divorce.” I cringe inside every time I hear that. May I respectfully

ask you, whoever you are, and whatever pain you have endured, please *never, ever* say divorce is God's will. You can say it is tragic, painful, heartbreaking, gut-wrenching, and dreadful, but *never* say it is God's will. People act as if God's will is some deep dark mystery you can never uncover or discern.

A few years ago, Paul Simon wrote and sang a song entitled, "Slip Sliding Away." One line of the song says, "God only knows; God makes His plans; the information's unavailable to the mortal man." That's the philosophy of our age that says since you can't really know God's will, who knows? Maybe my divorce was God's will. Maybe my adultery was God's will. Maybe my addiction was just God's will.

Paul Simon was wrong. Let me rephrase his lyrics: God only knows; God makes His plans; the information is available to any man who opens His Word. God's will is clearly seen in His Word. God cannot lie, so when He says something in His Word, that IS His will.

So let's say you are considering a divorce. Pastor, how can I find God's will concerning my possible divorce? Let's start with Malachi 2:16. God says, "I hate divorce." Do you know what that says in the original language? "I hate divorce." The same as in English!

In this passage, God says marriage is a sacred covenant—a contract—between a man and a woman. God is the Witness to the covenant. A divorce happens when the covenant, the contract, is violated and broken. God hates that. Is that clear enough? Or what about Jesus' words in Mark 10:9. Here's God's bottom line truth about marriage: Jesus said, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

That's not very popular these days. In fact, I was amazed to see the results of a recent Gallup Poll. Among Americans aged 45 or younger, 73% of those interviewed considered being married to the same person for life as "useless and unworkable."

If you are going to continually maintain your devotion to your mate you must do two things:

### **1. Keep your promise to your mate (don't break faith)**

Three times in this passage, God warns about "breaking faith." When you married your mate, you made a promise something like this: I take you, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish; 'til death do us part. That's a radical promise because you aren't saying, "I'll stay with you as long as I'm happy, and you don't change, and circumstances don't change." You're saying, "I'll stay with you **WHATEVER** happens—I promise!"

You made that promise to your mate in front of God and everybody. Verse 14 says God was the witness to your covenant. Before God, you have a solemn obligation to fulfill your promise to stay with your mate, whatever happens. The **ONLY** thing that will end your promise is the death of your mate.

There is a beautiful statement in Thornton Wilder’s 1942 drama “The Skin of Our Teeth.” The wife says to her husband: “I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them—it was that promise.”

Cindy and I won’t even consider getting a divorce; we are going to keep our promise to each other. If you ask Cindy she’ll tell you she has never considered divorce, but she has considered murder a few times! The word “divorce” just isn’t in our vocabulary when it comes to our marriage. A few years ago, I took an X-acto knife and cut the word “divorce” out of our dictionary. Now, don’t misunderstand me. We have friends who have been divorced and we grieve with them and for them, but when it comes to our marriage, that word doesn’t even exist.

If you are married, I suggest you remove the word divorce from your vocabulary as well. Don’t even mention it as an option in your marriage. Stay devoted to each other. If you get a divorce you’ll never get to experience the joy of old love.

## 2. Old love is the best love

Years ago there was a song that said, “Young love, first love, Filled with true devotion. Young love; first love; We share with deep emotion.” There is something special about a young love, or a first love, but I’m convinced old love is the best love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Nazis in WWII and died in a German concentration camp. He wrote the classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. While in prison, he wrote many letters, which have been preserved. In a letter to a young girl contemplating marriage his words are beautiful: “Is there anything more beautiful in life than a young couple clasping hands and pure hearts in the path of marriage? Can there be anything more beautiful than young love? Yes, there is a more beautiful thing. It is the spectacle of an old man and an old woman finishing their journey together on that path. Their hands are gnarled, but still clasped; their faces are seamed, but still radiant; their hearts are physically bowed and tired, but still strong with love and devotion for one another. Yes, there is a more beautiful thing than young love—Old love.”

It’s not easy to stay married to the same person all of your life. Sometimes it seems the easiest thing to do is to just walk away. In fact, I would say it isn’t just *hard* to stay married to the same person all your life—it’s *impossible* without God’s presence in your life and in your marriage. Most of you have seen those great billboards paid for by the DeMoss Foundation with a simple message from God like: Will the road you’re on get you to my place? –God. I love the one about marriage. It says: Loved the wedding, invite me to the marriage. –God. Good advice, you need to invite Jesus to be the Lord of your marriage.

At many wedding ceremonies, I read a couple of verses from Ruth because they express the nature of Biblical commitment. Although these words were spoken by Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, they are a powerful expression of the kind of devotion that should be a part of your

marriage: Ruth 1:16-17 "Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." That's the kind of commitment that gets heaven's attention.

## CONCLUSION

Because you have a body, there is a physical dimension to your marriage: affection and sex. Because you have a soul, there is an emotional dimension your marriage: talking and sharing together. But because you have a spirit, there is a spiritual dimension that cannot be ignored. The secret to maintaining a good marriage is to crown Jesus as your Lord individually and Lord over your marriage. He will be the super glue to keep you together.

Here's a marriage statistic you have heard before: In America 1 out of 3 marriages end in divorce. Maybe you haven't heard the next two statistics: 1 out of 105 marriages end in divorce if the couple attends church regularly. And 1 out of 1,155 marriages end in divorce if the couple attends church regularly and prays together regularly. So the spiritual dimension of your relationship is very important.

Couples, here's your homework: If you haven't already, designate a talking place -and meet there everyday. Guys, plan some special dates for your wife. Remove the word "divorce" from your vocabulary, and start praying together on a regular basis.

## OUTLINE

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2. Be creative in your conversation topics

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### II. DATE REGULARLY

"May you rejoice in the wife of your youth ... may you ever be captivated by her love." *Proverbs 5:18-19*

1. Schedule it—don't give your mate your leftovers!

2. Go away together—don't take the kids!

### III. DEVOTED CONTINUALLY

1. Keep your promise to your mate (don't break faith)

2. Old love is the best love



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes