

Marriage: Staying Close to Your Spouse

Two summers ago Cindy and I attended a *Marriage Get Away* at the Navigators headquarters at Glen Erie in the Colorado Springs area. The retreat was built around some small group times with short input on marriage and then assignments to do with your spouse. We loved the approach and found it very helpful. But one of the things that impacted us the most was something that was not on the original schedule.

The Nav couple who led the retreat invited the couple who had mentored them for years to come and share with us one night. This couple, Skip & Buzzie (Helen) Gray, had been married for 64 years. It was so clear as they interacted with us and with each other that night that this was a couple who had built a great marriage. Their relationship dripped with tenderness, kindness, affection, teamwork and love. You couldn't walk away from the time without thinking, "That it what I want my marriage to look like!"



If you are married, what do you want your marriage to look like? Some of you are newly married and you have this hope of having a marriage like Skip and Buzzie's. That's a good thing. Don't lose that hope! For those who have been married longer, do you still hope for something like what the Grays have or have you settled for something far less satisfying?

Tim Keller says, "Marriage is glorious but hard (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 13). What Cindy and I saw in the Gray's marriage was indeed glorious, but what we didn't get to see, however, is the hard work that they surely had invested over the 64 years of their marriage to build that kind of marriage. We just saw the fruit of their hard work.

So far in our sermon series this summer, *Alive and Well*, we've looked at parenting and singleness. Today and next week we are focusing on marriage and our hope is that as we focus on this vital relationship that it will spur on all of us who are married to continue to do the hard work of building a glorious marriage.

Now, I realize that there are all sorts of experiences in this room when it comes to marriage. Some of you are experiencing a good marriage and you look forward to input that can help you make it better. Others are committed to your marriage, but you've lost hope of it ever being something that you would call glorious. And so it's hard for you to believe what I'm going to share is going to help anything. Some of you aren't married but you want to be. Others have walked the painful experience of divorce. I want to say specifically to you this morning that I know this is a hard topic for you and that last thing I want is for you to feel any kind of judgment. Wherever you are at today let me encourage you to simply invite God to speak to your heart.

The foundational passage on marriage is found in Genesis 2. This is where God established the institution of marriage. Both Jesus and Paul, utilize this passage as they address questions related to marriage (Matt. 19:3ff; Mark 10:2ff; Eph. 5:31). This morning, we are not going to focus on the whole passage, but rather one aspect of the marriage relationship and that is the idea of cleaving. That's the core biblical idea that we are going to focus on this morning.

I. **The Core Biblical Idea: Cleaving** (Genesis 2:24)

Genesis 2:24 says:

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh (ESV).

This verse describes the uniting of a man and a woman in the most profound way to become a new entity called a *one flesh* relationship. It is a physical, spiritual, emotional unity call marriage. Jesus tell us in Matthew 19:6 that God Himself is the one who joins the man and the woman together.

The text says that being joined together in marriage involves leaving one's father and mother. Relational priorities change. No longer does one's parents have the priority, but now the first obligation and loyalty lies with one's spouse. And so the man is to leave and then it says he is to *hold fast to his wife*. The older translations say, "cleave." To "cleave" literally means to stick to, to cling to, to be glued to. The same word was used for Israel's relationship with God. They were to "hold fast" to him (Deut.10:20). And so marriage involves leaving, cleaving and becoming *one flesh*.

This morning, I want to focus on one part of this - the work of cleaving; the work of staying close to your spouse. This is not easy. This requires work. As you know in the very next chapter, Genesis 3, sin enters the world and holding fast gets harder. And we continue to experience this today. Marriage always involves the joining together of two sinful people. And so we are trying to build a glorious marriage, but we are sinful and selfish people living in a broken world. And staying close to one's spouse is hard.

We experience conflict and don't also do the best job of resolving it and it creates distance. Or we find growing resentments in our hearts towards our spouse because of disappointments or we find they have personality traits that drive us crazy. I think the main thing Cindy and I have experienced is what Robert Lewis calls "creeping separateness." It's this almost imperceptible growing distance that occurs over time as you move through the challenges of life – busyness, work pressures, children, etc. You stop investing in the relationship like you did in the earlier years and little by little there is this growing separateness. It's what many couples experience when the last child moves out of the home and the two of them look at each other and they hardly know each other. Creeping separateness. Staying close will require intentionality and hard work. But the hard work is worth it.

And so in the rest of our time, I want give some suggestions about how you can stay close to your spouse. What I'm sharing here may simply be reminders of things you already know. But if you are like Cindy and me, being reminded of things we know is helpful.

II. Strategies for Staying Close

First, **keep short accounts** with your spouse. As I mentioned, inevitably we will sin against each other – sometimes intentionally; often unintentionally. And so if we are going to stay close, we have to do the hard work of choosing to forgive. Ephesians 4:31-32 says:

³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Are you harboring any bitterness, wrath or anger towards you spouse? Paul tells you to put it away. He says to forgive as God in Christ forgave you. You CAN forgive. You CAN let go of the hurts and offenses. The key is to remember how God has forgiven you in Christ.

When Cindy and I went through premarital counseling, our pastor told us that when we didn't work through our conflict and forgive each other, it was like placing a brick between us. Maybe that first brick wouldn't seem like a big deal. We can still see each other and connect. But little by little over time if we continued to not truly resolve our conflict, another brick is added and then another until it becomes a wall of separation. If you don't do this hard work to keep short accounts, resentment and bitterness will grow and it will ruin any desire to be close to your spouse.

Are there some bricks in your relationship? Is there a wall? Forgiveness is essential for any good relationship and this is certainly true in your marriage. Are you keeping short accounts? Are you doing the work to forgive each other? This is essential to stay close to your spouse.

Here's a second strategy – **communicate regularly**. I know, pretty obvious, right? But are you really communicating?

For the two years that Cindy and I dated and were engaged, we had a long distance relationship. We did a lot of communicating by phone or through letters. At that point in our relationship communicating came easy. We intentionally spent time learning about each other and what was going on in each other's lives and hearts. We asked good questions. We listened. We communicated. And then we got married. And you would think that once we were married and actually living in the same home that communicating would get even easier. Wrong! It got harder. Part of what happens, I think, is that during dating and the early years of marriage there can be a lot of emotions and it is a time of new love that drives the desire to communicate. But over time those emotions wane. And life gets harder. We get busy. There are demands. You experience conflict. And communicating at a heart level just can become hard.

Gary Thomas says this:

In marriage, it is our duty to communicate. To be sure, every marriage needs times of silence and meditation. But in our relationship with our spouse, communication is a discipline of love (*Sacred Marriage*, 234).

Communication is a discipline. It is something you must choose to practice. And to do so is an act of love. This is part of the hard work of staying close to your spouse.

Let me give you two practical ideas. First, develop habits of **daily connection**. Eat your meals together and when you do turn the TV off and lay your phones aside and use the time to invest in communication. Go to bed together. Use those last moments of the day to connect.

Secondly, build in **weekly times** of focused communication. One of the things that Cindy and I have done to help foster deeper conversation is to have a weekly lunch date where we talk through a set of predetermined issues. We got this idea from an article and liked it and so here's what we do:

- Give an affirmation – And so I might affirm Cindy's wisdom or her creativity or some way I've seen her serve someone. We affirm.
- Then we share the greatest joy of the past week as well as the greatest struggle.
- Then we share a hope or wish that we have.
- Finally, we share something that the other can pray for us in the upcoming week.

Now, we don't do this every week. But we have found that this kind of practice helps us communicate in a way that draws us together. And so, find a way to communicate regularly.

Third, **pray together**. If you want to stay close to your spouse, the spiritual dynamic is vital. There are a lot of things that you can do to pursue God together, but I want to encourage you to consider praying together.

Early in our marriage we prayed together fairly regularly, but for some reason over time it fell away as a regular practice. But a couple of years ago we saw the example of another couple in our life group who prayed together every morning. They had been through some rocky patches in their marriage, but had found great benefit in starting a daily prayer time together. And so we began to pray together again. Before I head off to work, I'll go in to Cindy who is usually still getting ready for work and we will hold hands and pray for each other and our family and things on our minds. We have found power in being together is this way.

Here are some thoughts about trying this if you've never done it. First, **pick a specific time** and stick to it. If you don't this it will slide. **Appoint one of you to be the one responsible** to initiate the daily prayer time. **Start where you are both comfortable**. It may be that one or both of you are really uncomfortable praying out loud together. If so, you can still grab hands and pray together silently. Finally, **keep it short**. We typically pray for maybe 4 or 5 minutes. It isn't a long time. But even those few minutes are really helpful.

The last strategy I will mention is to make sure you **play together**. For most of us this is what we did at the start of our relationships, right? We went on dates. We laughed. We found out that we had a lot of fun doing stuff together. We played together.

But so often once we are married, we stop playing. We stop having fun. I don't think we mean to, but life just sort of becomes full of responsibilities. Work. Kids. Financial pressures. And we stop playing together. We stop making the investment of time. And this is detrimental to our relationships. Cindy and I have experienced this.

A couple of years ago when I was on my sabbatical one of the things we did was stay 3 nights at a nice hotel on the Plaza in KC to celebrate our anniversary. We went for runs together in the mornings. We went to the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum. We ate great meals. We went to a Royals game (which was great a couple of years ago). We had fun. We played together. There is something about playing together that creates companionship. It brings us together. I remember thinking at the end of that time, "Cindy is a lot of fun to be with."

Make sure you are playing together. It doesn't have to be a weekend away, it can be as simple as a walk together after supper or a board game or heading to the lake on the weekend.

Keep short accounts. Communicate regularly. Pray together. Play together. Of course there are many other things you can do to stay close, but let me encourage you to at least pick one of these strategies to focus on in the weeks ahead.

III. Your Greatest Resource for Staying Close

Now, as I come to the end of our time, I want mention what I believe is your greatest resource for staying close to your spouse. If you are a believer in Jesus, the Bible tells you that the Spirit of God dwells within you. And part of what the Spirit does in our lives is to help us become more and more like Jesus.

I want to read a familiar passage, Galatians 5:22-23, which lists the fruit of the Spirit. This passage paints a picture of the kind of people we become when God is having His way in us. As I read this, think about how your marriage would be changed if you were the kind of person described here.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (ESV)

Do you think it would help you stay close if you were patient and kind? If you were gentle and full of goodness? If you had joy and peace in your heart? If you were full of love? Of course it would.

Sometimes it is easy for us to think that if our spouse was different it would be easier to stay close to him or her, but I want to suggest that you focus on the person you are becoming. Is your life increasingly characterized by the fruit of the Spirit? If not confess this to God. Cry out to God for help! Ask Him to produce His godly character in your life. Of course, there are things we do to pursue this character; we must not be passive. We fill our minds with God's Word. We pursue God through prayer. We can do all kinds of things to open our lives up to God's work in our lives, but at the very heart of this it is all about faith. We trust Him. We look to Him to produce His fruit in our lives. This is the greatest resource for staying close to your spouse – the work of God's Spirit in your life!