

Your Surprising Secret for Making Your Marriage Work

When you said “I do” you imagined things would be great. Most people expect to be happy when they get married. It’s useful to stop and think, *What did you get married for?*

What did you expect married life would be like?

You probably imagined having someone to connect with after a long day, someone to cherish you and make you feel special, someone to fulfill your sexual needs, someone to fix meals for you or take care of things around the house, someone to listen to you when you wanted to talk, someone to spend time with, someone who would do things with you that you enjoyed, someone to go to bed with, someone you could be proud of, someone to spiritually connect with, perhaps someone to provide for and protect you, perhaps someone who would create a home for you, perhaps someone to be the parent to your children. As in *Sweet Home Alabama*, you wanted to be able “to kiss you any time I want.”

But how has that worked out for you? Your spouse isn’t the listener, helper at home, sex partner, provider or parent you hoped they would be. They disappoint you, hurt you and let you down. Although intellectually you may have married “for better or for worse,” you really did expect you’d be getting more out of this deal.

You probably got married because of what you thought your spouse would do for you. And when they don’t, you’re disappointed.

Looking at marriage that way will always, *always*, lead to disappointment. The only way marriage works, the only way any kind of love works, is if you focus on what you can give rather than what you can get.

Some people will take that idea and turn it into codependency. That's not love. Some people will take that to mean putting up with abuse or addiction. That's not love. Now please put those thoughts aside.

But the only hope you have of being happily married is to consistently focusing on what you can do for your spouse rather than what they can do for you.

An Example of Loving Well

Jay Wolf became the caretaker for his wife, Katherine, after a devastating cerebellar stroke which occurred just six months after their child was born. Jay says, "I often wonder if my marriage will be the death of me. I say this without sarcasm or angst, and I mean this both literally and figuratively. As the caregiver for a disabled spouse, my life will no doubt be shortened due to the inherent physical and emotional strain. And my marriage, like every commitment birthed of true, unstoppable goodwill toward someone else, has meant an end to part of the life I dreamed for myself, a death of the future Me I always thought I would be."

Is your marriage the death of you? It should be, in the sense that the "you" you thought you would be is forever changed. Marriage is one of the most important tools God uses in transforming you. Please get the idea of suffering or victimhood out of your mind; that's not what this is about. Thinking of yourself as suffering still makes it all about you. Instead, this is about the process of getting away from your navel-gazing self to become the person God created you to be.

Jay goes on: "For me, the real challenge isn't physically leaving my marriage. The challenge is to not leave my marriage in my heart." This is first and most importantly a heart matter. It's about learning to love well. And it raises the question, *have you left your marriage in your heart?*

(Jay and Katherine tell their story in *Hope Heals: A True Story of Overwhelming Loss and an Overcoming Love*.)

How Do You Do That?

We human beings don't naturally love well. By love most of us mean "I love the way you make me feel." That's not being in love with someone; that's being in love with a feeling.

You can only learn to love well by receiving love from the source. If that sounds like a cliché, it's only because it's true. You don't know how to do this on your own.

That's why you must regularly get filled up with God's love. It's why you must spend time in His presence, not desperately begging for things to change, but letting Him change *you*. It's why you need to constantly seek His perspective on your marriage and keep praying to understand who He needs you to be to your spouse in this season in your marriage. In His presence is where your heart gets what it needs to keep seeking connection with your spouse.

So when you aren't getting what you need and want and expect from your spouse, stop and ask these two questions:

- What is the state of my heart, and where does God want me to point my heart right now?
- How does God want me to love my spouse right now?

Marriage may or may not make you happy. But God can use your marriage as a powerful tool in helping you learn how to love well.

Your Turn: *In what areas has marriage been "the death of you?" How can you see God using marriage to change you? How are you learning to love well in the process? Leave a comment below.*
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