

Harmony in marriage – making the dream come true!

INTRODUCTION:

Harmony in marriage: A dream? An ideal? Or a reality?

One of our deepest dreams is to live in peaceful surroundings, enjoying harmony in relationships with the people around us – in society, in our homes & families, in work places etc.

Where we long for peace and harmony most of all is at home. Our longing is that we will enjoy a happy, harmonious relationship with our marriage partner. In our hearts lies the hope that in this most intimate of all human relationships, we may taste the blessedness of true love, care, peace – living month after month with disharmony, minor or major wars, attacking one another, etc. is very wearing and soul-destroying.

Are we supposed to just accept the inevitable – our fate – and learn to live with disharmony in all its difference shades and colours in our marriage?

Do we agree with the solution of a lady we met recently on the train: “We’re now the best of friends; but we just can’t live together!”?? So today’s solution to disharmony in marriage is: Split up, live your separate lives, do your own thing, and work on being good friends (while living apart).

Recognise the typical pattern in marriage in our society:

- Get married with lots of dreams (and some fears lurking in the back of one’s mind due to what we’ve seen happen in the marriages of others, eg parents, close friends etc.). “It won’t happen to us!”
- Then the inevitable happens – disagreements and disharmony. Questions: Did I marry the right person??? “He/she isn’t the person I married.” In other words, the other person changed!
- Some attempts to restore peace; push the problem under the carpet (not face up to them).
- Try to change the other person – and in this way to remove the barrier to harmony. Doesn’t work.
- Look elsewhere for happiness – in other activities (even in the church), or in other relationships. Fantasize : “I will achieve my dream of harmony with this person.”
- Thoughts set the stage for the downhill slide towards marriage breakup.

The media and the entertainment business feed us a message that disharmony, breakup in marriage – the norm

HOW CAN WE REVERSE THE DOWNWARD SLIDE? HOW CAN WE CHANGE OUR MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP FROM CONFLICT INTO HARMONY?

This will only be possible as we understand three underlying issues:

- **WHAT WE BELIEVE:** Looking at how we think – formation of our thought patterns, attitudes, values and beliefs (we can be very sincere about what we believe, but we may be very mislead and wrong in our beliefs – and consequently, our actions will also be destructive, eg I can believe strongly that I am right, and vow not to change – but it could be that I am totally mistaken – that I am blind to reality – my pride has blinded me to what is happening in my life – all of us need to face the probability that we have such blind spots and have a distorted view of reality – hence need the input of others, and especially of God’s Word) – these are most fundamental as these influence
- **WHAT WE DO:** How we act and behave – developing of habits and life-style and inevitably our character – what we do in our daily living is nothing other than the values and the beliefs that lie hidden deep within us – we may not like this fact – but if our actions differ from the convictions or beliefs we confess with our mouths, this only means that what we *really* believe is not what we say we believe
- **HOW WE FEEL** – such a strong point in today’s society – is not the primary issue in God’s sight (in the Scriptures) – our emotions are very unreliable and if we allow our emotions to dictate how we think and act, then we will go down very destructive paths – but this doesn’t mean that we can discount either our own feelings or the feelings of our mate – running rough shod over them, denying them etc.

ACCEPT THE FACT: AS LONG AS YOU ARE ON THIS EARTH, YOU WILL ALWAYS EXPERIENCE CONFLICT, INCLUDING IN YOUR MARRIAGE.

Conflict is inevitable in every human relationship – in differing degrees, in various forms – from the normal, everyday disagreements to deep and lasting conflicts over principle issues – creating division and a breakdown of communication

Conflicts in marriage are with us all the way through marriage – different kinds and degrees – but at no point should we become lazy in relating and communicating with one another

The ideal marriage is NOT a marriage without conflict but a marriage where conflict is handled in positive and constructive ways.

It is NOT healthy to think of the ideal life as being without conflict – like with some personalities there is a strong avoidance of conflict (eg introverts) at any cost – so instead of speaking out and potentially being in conflict with someone, they will easily allow other people to have their way, they won't express themselves freely etc. – but they will feel anger and resentment deep down.

UNDERSTAND THE ROOTS FOR CONFLICT IN YOURSELF.

Conflict goes back to the Garden of Eden. Sin causes separation – between God and man, and also between man and woman. Cf. In the Godhead – the Father, Son and Spirit – there is perfect unity and harmony.

SIN = self-centredness – living life with one's own "self" at the centre – on the throne – seeking to control one's circumstances and the people in one's life so that they all fit in with your will – as long as we are controlled by our own self-will and personal ambitions etc., the more we will create disharmony all around us – or build an environment with a false sense of peace and harmony = people relating to us out of fear, keeping the peace by giving in to our wishes because they want to maintain happy relationships – but in the process, the harmony we achieve is "false" – forced, from pressure, manipulation, intimidation – like the peace in a communist society where everyone knows how they are to behave if they are to live through each day

PRIDE is the greatest factor – my own self-will, my unwillingness to say honestly and sincerely: "I was wrong!" Male ego – I'm particularly susceptible to negative, put-down comments in front of my friends

God's peace and harmony is marked by . . .

- true inner freedom (we can be ourselves as people who are loved as we are – hence true love drives out all fear),
- deep and abiding joy (inward and real)

Harmony in marriage is an impossibility as long as we refuse to see the root of disharmony in relationships within ourselves – as long as we point the finger and as long as self-interest and self-will remain in control, there will always be potentially destructive conflict.

UNDERSTAND OTHER COMMON FACTORS BEHIND CONFLICTS IN MARRIAGE.

We all enter into marriage as two unique though different persons/individuals (being different does not mean that one is better & the other is not as good) = differing personalities (extroverts & introverts), temperaments, life experiences, cultures, differing belief systems and values that have shaped the way we think/act/respond (whether we like it or not) – these all normally lie deeply hidden below the surface, and don't come out into the open until circumstances force them to the surface, eg after having children sooner or later two different values and approaches to raising their children will emerge (sometimes not until around

10 years into marriage), seen in differing attitudes and approaches to the education of their children – these values will in turn affect what they want to spend their money on – a common source of conflict, which will in turn mean the need to find the money for the perceived needs of the children, such as the need for the wife and mother to work or the father to get two jobs in order to pay for more expensive education – the value on a good education is rooted in our cultural way of thinking that with better education comes a better (paying) job which is the sure route to a secure life and happiness – the hidden values are prestige (what other people think of us), temporal security, materialism, and happiness that comes through having, getting etc. – these values affect choices, decisions – and all of this reflects our society's views on the worth of an individual – either intrinsic worth (given by God the Creator) or through attaining certain goals or standards (material goals, one's position in the community, based on the acceptance by others on the basis of their standards – beauty, education, physical prowess et al)

So where there are two differing and contrasting belief and value systems represented in the husband and wife, inevitably there will be conflicts on different levels over a long period of time

We normally discover these deeper realities only AFTER we are married – which means when we are at a point of no return – so the issue is: How are we to face such potentially difficult and disturbing situations in marriage? Just grin and bear it? Do nothing and hope that the storm will quickly pass (eg that lightning will strike one of you and it will all be over!)?

A profound secret for the enjoyment of life and harmony in marriage is to recognise, respect and learn to enjoy each other's differences

The greater the differences between husband and wife, the greater the potential for conflict, eg cultural or racial differences highlighting different values (work versus relationships – Geoff & Basia)

Our calling in marriage is to live together in such a way that we make each other the richer

LEARN TO HANDLE CONFLICT CREATIVELY AND CONSTRUCTIVELY.

Agree on the fundamentals:

- ◆ Roles in marriage: acting responsibly, taking your role seriously, being a man and a woman – eg woman's need for a protector-husband, a man who is sensitive and caring, accepting of each other's differences and differing needs as husband and wife
- ◆ Affirmation: Our need for affirmation from one another
- ◆ Listening: Our responsibility to listen to one another – set aside time to listen to both sides – don't come to conclusions before listening: "He who speaks before listening"
- ◆ LOVE: expressed in understanding, caring, listening sensitively, spending time to communicate what is on your hearts – when you love your partner in truth, you are in truth loving yourself (Eph.5); you cannot say you love someone and wound them with your words
- ◆ Forgiveness: Whenever you sin against one another, God's way is to repent of your sin (ie change your mind), to humbly and openly confess your sins to one another and to freely forgive one another

Wrong (harmful, destructive) responses:

- Fight: attack, wound, humiliate, condemn, strike out at
- Flight: Run, escape, hide, fantasize, e.g. "If only I had a different husband or wife...!" Or "It wasn't God's will for me to marry this person! Now I will find God's choice for me." Or "I married an unbeliever; I made a big mistake." – giving rise to thoughts of separation and divorce – such thoughts should not be entertained
- Blame-game/ accusations: "YOU..." – personal struggle dealing with my perfectionistic tendencies
- Guilt: "If only we were more spiritual! We should pray more etc." – take the blame upon one's self

Right attitudes and responses:

- Believe that this is God's will – and hence for Christians, this is what we are to work towards – keep God's best always in clear focus
- Don't try in your own strength – only through the help of the Spirit
- Be clear of the goal (reality vs. dreams) = harmony and unity in your marriage (marked by openness, freedom vs. pressure/force, love vs. love, joy and peace)
- Be committed together to reach the goal – keep encouraging one another
- Keep alive a strong and growing desire to build harmony and unity into your marriage (it will never, ever just happen) – work hard together – keep persevering – don't expect it to happen overnight – in the first year or even first ten years of marriage
- Refuse to give in to the temptation to give up when you face tough, difficult and discouraging situations of conflict in your marriage
- Stay on the alert all throughout your marriage – major conflicts normally have small beginnings

Practical guidelines:

- Always think of conflict as NORMAL – the way to work towards harmony in marriage is NOT to try to make your partner like you.
- Avoid conflict – if you are a person who “enjoys” stirring up conflict in marriage, you have a sin problem – you don't have the mind of Christ – “as much as it depends on you, live at peace with all men” – “peace-makers”
- Resolve as quickly as possible; don't let the sun go down on your wrath. Don't let conflicts get out of hand.
- Remember there are always two sides in every conflict including yours – be open to seeing your side, to seeing the possibilities for where you have been a part of the problem, then confessing your failures, with an openness to change – if you focus only on the other person's problem, only see that person's faults, there is a strong possibility that you are blind to reality – there is probably little hope for a positive end to the problem.
- Be sensitive to the heightened possibility for conflict at certain times and seasons, eg tough times of transition, stressful times creating anxiety and the possibility for over-reactions (eg uncertainty in the work place, unemployed – loss of sense of well-being), menopause, pregnancy, new baby in the household etc. – need to give one another more space – call to be more forbearing with one another
- Be aware of each other's “red flag” issues:
 - Money
 - Sexual needs, or abuse – pornography, Internet
 - Spiritual experiences
 - Theological issues
 - Raising of children, discipline
 - Trying to force or pressure your partner to agree with a plan – manipulating the other person – control – to pressure that person to agree with you, to do what you wish etc.
 - Acting without integrity – dishonestly – covering up – creating distrust and suspicion – will hurt the relationship and cause your partner to be on edge – you are only hurting yourself
- Take action to deal with genuine problem areas (eg physical abuse, other sins) – don't push such issues under the carpet – peace and harmony will only be restored when there is a genuine change of heart and the fruits of repentance are evident
- Distinguish between normal conflicts (disagreements) & deeper conflicts (issues that are threatening the relationship) – if you are already in a long term conflict, you will probably need to have someone who is skilled in conflict resolution to help you – NOT a counsellor who will tell you that the way out is separation or to go your own way, or divorce but rather one who will help facilitate communication between you and guide you in the process of finding a biblical solution – sometimes we enter into marriage as hurting, wounded people – people who have been deeply sinned against – and as a result of deep, unresolved problems in our own lives we respond by hurting the one we love the most – by lashing out – we need help – need to admit our problem/need and seek help from people who can genuinely help (people who share your convictions)

- Learn to express your pain in a non-threatening way: “When you do or say _____ , I feel _____ .” Cf. “YOU _____ .” Communicate what is troubling you, without heavy words of accusation with an intent to hurt
- Don't try to solve all conflict situations NOW – give time to cool down – pushing your mate in the heat of the moment to sit down and talk through the issues and come up with a solution
- Don't work out your conflicts in front of your children – always behind closed doors
- Don't gossip about your problems with other people, including family members (eg your parents – thus setting them against your partner) – you are out to get their sympathy rather than solving the conflict – even to ask for prayer – don't damage the reputation of your partner by telling tales about them to others and sharing openly your conflicts around the place or in the wider family circle – that will only bring more serious conflict and make the resolution that much harder and more involved or problematical