

IT'S OK TO NOT BE OK
SINGLE – MARRIED – SINGLE AGAIN

The stories most of us kind of grew up on, have a way of ending, "And they got married and lived happily ever after." In the story the characters meet, they fall in love, they get into trouble, she eats the fruit she wasn't supposed to eat, the carriage turns back into a pumpkin, and she pricks her finger against the spinning wheel and sleeps for a hundred years. Then things have a way of working out, and Snow White eventually marries Prince Charming, and Cinderella marries Prince Charming, and Sleeping Beauty marries Prince Charming. Apparently there were no laws against bigamy back in the old days. I always wondered, "How come it's always Prince Charming? Why did Prince Charming's wife end up happily ever after when he was married to all of these women?"

There's something inside of all of us that wants a happy ending. Folks who write books, plays, movies, or songs will tell you they always sell better if they end happily ever after. I say that because we're in this series because we don't live in a "happily ever after" world. To be real and to acknowledge, "I'm not okay" is actually a very important part of faith.

We're in this series, "It's OK to NOT be OK," and we're talking about disappointment, hurt, and pain. Today we're asking how this relates to marriage, separation, divorce, or singleness. Let's ask: when it comes to these relational parts of life, are people – are you, or someone you know – Not OK?

- I'm thinking about a middle-aged man who feels like his guts got kicked out because his wife told him she is leaving him and taking his daughter with her.
- I'm thinking about the young couple who were excited and sincere on their wedding day, but within a short time they are both heart-broken and angry and divorced.
- I'm thinking about the single woman who wants so much to have a faithful husband, lover, and companion, but is confused and dismayed after being abandoned.
- I'm thinking about a widow who, when her husband was ill, prayed, "God, just let him be healed. Just let me grow old together with him." But God didn't. Decade after decade, she still feels like she has been ripped in two.
- I'm thinking about some children whose one prayer was, "God, make our mommy and our daddy come back together." God did not put their mommy and their daddy back together.
- I'm thinking of a woman who comes to church all by herself week after week, year after year. Her one prayer is, "God, would you just let this person I'm

married to come to know You and love You? Can we share that together?"
God hasn't answered that prayer.

- And I'm thinking about a couple, and they're still living under the same roof, but they're really just strangers in the same house.

I want to tell you, whatever is going on, whatever your hurt, whatever your disappointment around marriage, around divorce, around separation, around widowhood, around singleness, it's okay for you to be here. We're so glad you're here.

Why do these hurts and heart-breaks have to happen? Why? Of course the answers to this question are complex. There are many important angles to consider. Leading historians and sociologists have narrowed the reasons down to a few *central* reasons. Let me share some with you.

1. INDIVIDUALISM – Individualism is a value at the core of American culture. It was this “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” spirit that led our ancestors to these shores. Sociologist Robert Bellah says that in the last 50 years *rugged individualism* has shifted to an *expressive individualism*. He says that now our first priority is to express our individual needs and desires. In other words, being scrappy and determined to make the best life for yourself and your family, has become “I got to be me!” The new value is more self-focused. The new value is at odds with the sacrifice and self-denial that are needed for marriage and parenthood to last a life-time.

2. JOINING OF “SOUL-MATES” – Another belief that weakens marriages and families these days is a shift in the timing. It's popular today for us to think that a person first discovers their “soul mate,” their perfect match, and so then they get married. This is kind of like the “eHarmony” commercials. There's nothing wrong with using computer data to help find a match. The idea in their advertising, however, is that they will find the other person out there who is “just perfect” for you. But what if after you are married you have doubts that the person you married is the right one for you?

The idea of finding your “soul mate” is a belief that makes for good Hollywood movies. An older, successful married couple, however, will tell you that it isn't true that you marry your “perfect match.” Instead, you marry a person you care deeply for, a person you love, a person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Then over the years together, you knock the rough edges off of each other, and in time, together you *BECOME* the ideal person for each other.

3. COMPANIONSHIP MARRIAGE – Years ago, people had to get married to survive. The economic reality caused people to stick with a marriage longer because you *needed* each other. Then, America became wealthy after World War 2. Suburbs popped up. There could be one bread-winner in the family. So the focus of marriage shifted from economic survival, to having a companion and

getting along relationally. So when couples don't get along, when satisfaction in marriage goes down, when people don't get out of the relationship what they want relationally, the marriage ends.

4. BREAKDOWN OF CAUSE – EFFECT One more factor that has weakened marriage and family is the disconnection between the act of love and children. In 1961, G.D. Searle & Co. made the first birth control pill available. That created a disconnect in people's minds between the cause and effect of making love and having children. And since most contraceptives are managed by the woman privately, the possibility of children and the resulting child was increasingly seen as the woman's responsibility alone. If she became pregnant, it became viewed more as the woman's responsibility, which left the man free to walk away. It leads to the popular idea that a family really doesn't need a man to fill the roles of husband and father.

There are more factors that lead to hurt and heart-ache you may have gone through in your marriage or family. Those are some of the main causes. And in spite of all those factors that make it harder than ever to be have successful, joyful, loving relationships at home, still, marriage and family still works! Did you know ...

- When couples say their marriage is unhappy, 2/3 of those couples, if they stay together, 5 years later they say they are happy. 2/3 are happy 5 yrs. later IF THEY STAY TOGETHER.
- When asked if they are happy, 62% of married couples not only say they are happy, but that they are VERY HAPPY.
- There are so many studies – just piles of data – that show that MARRIED PEOPLE have better mental health, financial health, emotional healthy, physical health.
- Children who grow up in a 2 parent family are 200 to 300% more likely to have a positive life outcome.

In other words, marriage, hands down, is STILL a good thing.

WHAT'S THE "SECRET INGREDIENT" TO A "SUCCESSFUL" MARRIAGE?

Since Religion is so important to marriage, what does the Bible have to say about this? There's so much, yet for today, just 3 things I want to share.

The Presumption of Marriage God's Way: Two Gospel Impacted People. A few minutes ago, today's New Testament reading said: *"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. ... Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."* Ephesians 5: 1-2, 21

Gospel is to be driven into your life and fill your whole life in practical ways. Not just understand it, or believe it. One of the effects of the Gospel is that you serve one another. The Gospel erodes your self-centeredness.

The Gospel tells you “you are a lot worse than you think”. It cost God the life of His Son to pay for your sin! The Gospel also tells you “you are a lot more loved than you think.” God gave His ultimate treasure for you! God loves you so much that Jesus died for you!

The Gospel humbles you more and loves you more at the very same time.

The Gospel gets rid of your self-centeredness by humbling you. And gets rid of your neediness by loving you.

God makes you into a person who doesn't need a lot of thanks, doesn't need a lot of strokes, doesn't need a lot of affirmation. You become content with who you have become in Christ. So you are much more able to give. You learn to put the needs of others before your own.

During a wedding rehearsal, the groom approached the minister with an unusual offer. "Look, I'll give you \$100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to me and the part where I'm to promise to 'love, honor and obey' and 'forsaking all others, be faithful to her forever,' I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that part out." He passed the minister the cash and walked away satisfied.

The wedding day arrived, and the bride and groom have moved to that part of the ceremony where the vows are exchanged. When it comes time for the groom's vows, the minister looks the young man in the eye and says, "Will you promise to obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life and swear eternally before God and your lovely wife that you will not ever even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?"

The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice, "Yes." Then the groom leaned toward the minister and hissed, "I thought we had a deal." The minister put the \$100 into his hand and whispered back, "She made me a much better offer."

In marriage you serve each other! In marriage you serve each other *willingly!* When two people are filled with the Gospel, their marriage is profoundly impacted.

The Presumption of marriage is that both people are filled with the Gospel. So this is saying – Women, don't you dare trust a man and give him this kind of leadership over you unless his male ego has been permanently reshaped by the cross of Jesus. Women, don't trust yourself to a man unless, following the pattern of Jesus, he says, “I am willing to give anything, even my life, in order to make you thrive. And I want to hear from you what you think that is.”

This happens only when there are two believers, two people permanently changed by God the Holy Spirit, living inside you.

So, where are the details? Does this mean the husband makes all the decisions? No, it doesn't say that. Does it mean the husband makes all the decisions about the money? No, doesn't say that. The Bible nowhere gives

these nitty gritty details because human life changes over the centuries and God's Word stands timeless over all of human life thru all time. So the message is that 2 people who are so impacted by the Gospel can figure these things out in their own home. Each person is seeking to OUTDO the other for serving, seeking to OUTDO the other for pleasing the other person – and they'll be able to work anything out!

Now, let's look at what God says in the Bible is **The Purpose of Marriage God's Way: Gospel Reenactment**. Why do people get married? Down thru time, people didn't marry for love or personal reasons. Marriage was primarily a business proposition. You got married to help your family's status and position in the world. You got married to give security to your extended family or your clan. That's what it was. And in many parts of the world, it's the same today.

In our Western culture, it's very, very different. You marry for love. You marry for your own individual fulfillment. You marry for someone who will make you feel good about yourself, give you incredible amount of affection and romantic love.

The Bible says both those approaches to marriage are wrong! Marriage is not a business deal. And marriage is not about personal fulfillment.

Today's New Testament reading stated this idea of Gospel reenactment when Paul writes: ²⁵ ***Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave His life for it.***

God looked down from heaven and He saw us incomplete, deficient, not able to live the full life He intended for us. He saw us ruined by sin and our self-centeredness. But He LOVES us. And He came and He gave Himself for us on the cross. He took our punishment on Himself, died for our sins.

But God isn't only satisfied with winning your forgiveness. He's not only interested in forgiving your past. No, no, no! He wants MORE for you. If you love someone, you don't want to make the other person better, bring them peace and wholeness. So what does God do? He comes into our lives and forgives you – what the theologians call "justification." And the Holy Spirit continues on with His work in you to do what the theologians call "sanctification" – more and more getting you to die to sin and live for righteousness. God changes you to live in a way that loves God back by doing what pleases Him, and at the same time it is best for you - the most joyful and fulfilling life for you.

Jesus comes into your life and He has a vision for your future. He says, "I know what you could be. I was there at your creation, and I know that now you're living only a shadow of what you COULD be. And I love you and I want the best for you. And through My blood and thru My sacrifice, I'm going to GET you there."

Christians know that God, the Holy Spirit, is constantly working in you to change. He wants to get you to repent, and leave the sin and junk, anger, gossip, jealousy, cheap momentary thrills, and - leave it all behind. We learned this in “What On Earth Am I Here For” – the 3rd purpose God made you is to Become Like Christ.

So what’s that say about marriage? In our world we look for a spouse who is a “finished product.” We think marriage is about finding someone who is a rising star, has some money, a decent job, some status, good friends, etc. That’s not Gospel reenactment. That’s the Western idea that marriage is about bringing you personal fulfillment. We usually look for what the other person can bring TO YOU!

Two Spirit-filled, Gospel-impacted people are to look more deeply than that. You start dating and you get attracted to WHAT GOD IS DOING IN THAT PERSON’S LIFE. You fall in love with the person God is making that person to become.

Thru marriage, you BECOME PART of what God is doing in the other person’s life. You put the other person’s flourishing and thriving ahead of your own, and by sacrificing yourself, bring about their flourishing. That’s the purpose of marriage. That’s what makes marriage and family be filled with lasting love and joy.

Now, one last point before I close. In the Bible, God tells us that **Marriage Is Not The Only Place A Person Can Live The Gospel.** In the ancient world, being mated, being paired off to have children was what the state needed, the family needed to survive, what the economy needed. So Buddha is married. Confucius is married. Muhammad is married to 13 wives. King Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines. But Jesus was single. Paul was single. Christianity says that marriage is not an idol, or the exclusive road to “happily ever after.” Godly marriage and chaste singleness are both paths to joy-filled, amazingly meaningful lives where a person can love others because Christ has first loved us.

In my family I think of Sue’s brother who lived a fulfilled life and was very content being single. I think of a great-great aunt who told the man who proposed to her, “Get up off your knee, you look silly.” And she found joy and avenues to serve others. I think of a very generous bachelor uncle who found joy in quietly blessing others.

God guided Paul to write these amazing words, ***“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. [...] Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. [...] For the present form of this world is passing away.”*** 1 Corinthians

7:7-8,17,31b He is speaking about marriage and singleness and being a widow or widower.

The ability to be single and satisfied in Christ is a great and powerful gift. So whether single, or married, or divorced, or struggling in marriage now – no matter what the situation of your life is, God isn't finished with you yet.

All are sinful and all are forgiven by One Savior, Jesus Christ, who died in our place to win full forgiveness. And all experience pain, and the pain will get healed only through a God who went to a cross so He would know our pain. And all are given opportunities to know God's amazing love personally, and to share His love by serving and caring for other people in His Name and to His honor. AMEN.