

## Staying married

“I can’t take it anymore,” she sobbed. A box of tissues sat next to her on the sofa, several crumpled up in her hands. “He is so mean to me. And he doesn’t quit. He acts like he hates me. I ask him to speak more kindly to me and he just laughs. He never listens. I feel like dirt around him. What should I do, pastor?” Her pastor sat across from her, his face grave, inwardly praying. She continued, “It’s not like we haven’t gone to counseling. I’ve tried three or four times. He went once, then quit. Said he was never going back. I mean, I’ve done my best. My friends tell me I should leave. Some days I want to, I mean I really want to. Then I feel guilty because I know Christians aren’t supposed to get divorced. I wanted a Christian marriage, but it didn’t happen. My mother always told me I was making a mistake. I guess she was right.” She looked down at the carpet, utter discouragement in her voice. With a whisper, she added, “There’s this man at work. He is so nice to me. He says I’m pretty. He would never put me down, like my husband does. I wish I had married someone like him.”

She stopped. Her pastor said, “May I share some thoughts with you?” “Yes,” she said. “Thank you for listening to me ramble. I’m sorry about crying, but thank you for listening. Yes, I want to hear what you have to say. Please. That’s why I’m here.”

“Two things come to mind,” he began. “First, about that man at work. Whatever you do or don’t do in terms of your marriage, you certainly do not want to become involved with someone else. Right now, that would be just pure temptation. Jesus has said clearly that to leave a marriage for the sake of someone else is adultery. And you don’t want to do that.” She nodded slowly. “Yes, you are right,” she said. “But it feels good to be treated well by a man.” Her pastor smiled and said, “I can understand that. But I’m relieved that you know you need to stay well away from that kind of entanglement.”

“The more important issue for you, in my opinion, is for you to decide what kind of person you want to become.” He paused, and then continued, “If you are just looking for relief, then it would be hard for me not to agree with you to leave your husband. No question, in leaving, you will find some relief. Divorce will be painful, but your marriage is already painful. In terms of your children, even a “C” or “D” marriage is better than divorce. But I would like to point you to something higher than finding relief, or even what is best for your children. What I’m thinking about is the strong possibility that your very difficult marriage is exactly what



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God is using to mold you into the kind of person He intends for you to become.”

He waited, then continued. “This is a hard truth, but an important one. If the only reason we are here earth is so that we can be “happy,” then it would make perfect sense for us to eliminate and discard everything that is unpleasant and difficult. But if what the Bible says is true, and I know that you believe it to be so, then your life has a higher purpose. God is training you to become the kind of person He can trust to reign with Jesus Christ for eternity. Every time you trust Him, you are creating “treasures in heaven.” That being the case, what better school for learning divine love could there be than in your marriage? Where else will you learn to “bear with one another,” to “prefer others before yourself,” to “turn the other cheek,” to “forgive as the Lord forgave you,” to “lay down your life for your friends,” and to be “strong in the Lord and in His mighty power,” if not right now in your marriage? I promise you, based on God Himself, that He will teach you through the Holy Spirit how to live by His sufficiency alone and rise above these circumstances. But only you can make that choice.”

The conversation you just read is a created one, but the gist of it goes on all the time. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ taught His disciples about the radiant life of God available to them now, surrounding them in the kingdom of the heavens. He knew that most of the married men listening to Him had an “escape route” in their minds, in case their wives turned out to be displeasing to them. The legalisms of their day made it easy for men to obtain a divorce. To be “righteous” in a divorce, they were taught to obtain a certificate of divorce for their wives, so as to “do right” by them. Jesus wryly insisted that if they really wanted to do right by their wives, they would stay married to them! “It was said also, whosoever putteth away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement. But I say unto you, that every one that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication,

maketh her an adulteress, and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away, committeth adultery.” (Mt 5:31-32)

Any married person knows that marriage is hard, sometimes really hard. Our culture has shaped us into a people who find it difficult to live with any other human being. But God is thoroughly invested in marriage succeeding. His declaration in Genesis, “It is not good for man to live alone,” is still true. Jesus refused to enter the debate about “righteous divorce.” Instead, He quietly but firmly said, “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” (Mt 19:6)

But what do you do if you are no longer in love?

It is bound to happen. What our culture refers to as “being in love,” is what the Greek culture called Eros, romantic love. Wonderful, but transitory. On Christian radio not long ago, I heard a speaker say, “Every marriage goes through three phases: an excitement phase, a disappointment phase, and an acceptance phase.” He is right. Too often we reach that “disappointment” phase and conclude we must have made a mistake. Not so. The disappointment phase will happen, no matter who we marry. Eros simply does not have staying power. God intends to move us beyond the disappointment phase to acceptance and companionship, and shape within us the three other Greek loves: Storge (family love), Philia (friendship), and for His children through Jesus Christ, Agape (divine love).

God understands that sometimes divorce is the only thing left. But in a world where people need companionship, in which children need to be safely raised, in which life is short, and in which that life is more about learning to love than being loved, God desires to work with us to stay the course in marriage.

Even just one spouse can stand in the gap and declare believing, “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord!” Are you that person? If so, keep trusting. Keep standing. Keep declaring the promises of God over your marriage. God is not through with you or your marriage. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb 12:2)

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