

# **A Biblical Prescription For Couples with Marriage Problems**

**Preston Graham, Jr.**

I. A Necessary Reorientation: Our Ways are not always God's ways-- Happy are those who will by faith make God's ways his/her ways!

A. What does the world say will make you "happy?"

B. What exactly is hoped for in happiness? (a place of belonging, a place of peace from..., a place of satisfaction, a place of having significance, a place of being loved, a place of contentment, etc.)

Note: In Scripture, "happy" is an English translation of the term used to describe covenant blessing or "beatitude." This happiness is ultimately heaven where these things will be constant and full!

C. What does God say will make you "happy?"

Pss. 1:1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

Pss. 34:8 O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Pss. 40:4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

Pss. 84:12 O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Pss. 94:12 Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law,

Pss. 112:1 Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.

Pss. 119:1 Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. 2 Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,

Pss. 128:1 Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways. 2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Observation: Beware of making an idol out of marriage or some expectation you have for marriage!

Idol-- that which you trust in and in fact cannot be content without so as to satisfy your need for security (belonging, love, affection) and significance (self-worth, confidence, purpose)

The True Test:

Can you say with Paul, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have... (Philip.4:11)

Can you therefore resolve with Paul to rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice... whatever is true... pure... pleasing... commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philip.4:8ff)

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God's original design was that man and woman should live in fellowship with Him and in a selfless relationship of mutual giving to each other... But something has gone wrong in our marriage. I no longer believe that my needs are already met. I seem to think that I need my spouse to give me security and significance before I can respond as I should. I now wait for her to fill me first, then I give of myself to her... The goal of oneness can be almost frightening when we realize that God does not intend that my wife and I find our personal needs met in our marriage... Our personal needs for security and significance can be genuinely and fully met only in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. To put it another way, all that we need to function effectively as persons is at any given moment fully supplied in relationship with Christ and in whatever He chooses to provide. (p.22, 34)

Exercise: Think of some ways that God might meet your needs that you feel are not being sufficiently met in your spouse.

A Resulting Preliminary Covenant: I will resolve to trust God for my happiness in whatever circumstances He ordains and If God commands it, I will obey it, even if at first it seems unnatural and perhaps even implausible.

II. A Three Stage Prescription for Rebuilding a Troubled Marriage:

1. A Prescription from the Sanctity of Marriage

a. The Sanctity of Marriage: See also Marriage and Divorce

Mal. 2:13 And this you do as well: You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. 14 You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was a witness

between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. 16 For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

(See also Gen.2:23-24-- using covenant language, a covenant vow sanctified by God's initiative is used in instituting marriage as a common grace institution. Marriage is "sacred" as a creation institution for believers and non-believers alike.)

Resulting Commitment

1Cor. 7:12 To the rest I say--I and not the Lord--that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

Here, Paul applies the sanctify of marriage as a common grace institution so as to prohibit even a believing spouse from divorcing his/her unbelieving spouse.

#### A Significant Observation:

While your spouse may or may not be an unbeliever, to the degree that your spouse has characteristics that you would judge outside the sphere of "belief", then you must still make your peace with these things so as to remain faithful to your spouse as a "believing" husband or wife. That is to say that you can not withdraw your Christian graces and commitments for lack of the same in your spouse. Nor can you selectively dole out your Christian graces so as to specifically apply to your spouses Christian characteristics, but then withhold your Christian graces so as respond to your spouses non-Christian characteristics. What does Paul say, but that the believer (as a believer) ought to live with his/her unbelieving spouse. That is to say that marriage itself is sacred, both as applied to the Christian and non-Christian aspects of a given partner! Each spouse then is to do and say what they do, "as unto the Lord" in so far as the institution of Marriage is ultimately the Lords and is unto Him.

Covenant # 1: Derived from the Sanctity of Marriage:

That I will resolve to faithfully extend myself including all Christian graces to my spouse regardless of my judgments concerning his/her Christian or non-Christian characteristics.

#### Two Biblical Qualifications:

1. Up until this would cause me to directly violate a clear command of God.
2. Up until God's provision for divorce in the case of adultery or desertion-- the latter may be extended to such cases as there is genuine threat to physical harm due to spousal violence.

#### Exercise:

1. List those characteristics about your spouse that you believe to be within the "Christian" sphere-- Respond with thanksgiving.
2. List those characteristics about your spouse that you judge to be outside of the "Christian" sphere-- Respond with a resolution to trust God for the needs they may represent to you and make your peace with it so as to re-commit yourself to extending to your spouse all Christian graces in marriage especially as these things are present-- and do this as unto the Lord!

#### 2. A Prescription from the Biblical Instructions Concerning Relational Co-ordination in Marriage:

a. Explanation: Assuming that there are "two ordinates" in marriage, then as in all social relations, there is need for some strategy by which these "two" will co-ordinate so as to function together as one. Again, we want a strategy that will trust in the instructions of God for a happy marriage.

#### b. The Biblical Principle:

Gen. 3:16 To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Was this a curse or a provision that God committed himself to in order to restore peace and holiness in marriage?

•Note the "yet" which puts the second clause in contrast to the first clause regarding the "curse." •Note also the instruction under the New Covenant concerning spousal relations. (Eph.5, Col. 3, 1Peter 2) •Note finally that "rule" is a benevolent term in the Bible-- a concept that implies that the "governor" extends his rule so as to benefit and bless those under his jurisdiction.

Heb.15:17, Obey your leaders and sub-ordinate (submit) yourselves to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing-- for that would be harmful to you.

Principle: God has chosen to commit Himself to working through the co-ordinating roles of which the wife is in a "sub-ordinating" relation to the "husband ordinate." This is an aspect not of the curse, but of a provisional solution in a less than perfect world-- a solution that will be obsolete in heaven according to Christ. (Matt. 22:30) This solution pertains to the "social" aspects of a relationship and should not be falsely interpreted to imply anything about the relative value of the man or women. We know that both man and women are derived from God equally and are therefore co-equal in worth and persons.

(We can observe the same principle working itself out in the Trinity. Surely Christ is "co-equal" with God, yet Christ sub-ordinated himself so as to be under the "government" of God the Father.)

#### c. This Principle Applied by God's Own Instructions:

Assuming our first Prescription, what is a spouses Biblical duty to especially those aspects that are judged by the spouse to be outside of the "Christian sphere?"

God's answer is adjusted so as to reflect the above principle of co-ordination as noted in 1 Peter.

1Pet. 3:1 Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives....6 Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

1Pet. 3:7 Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life--so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

Comments:

Wives: If God is going to bless your home, he will do it within the means that He has appointed. Perhaps you have complaints about your husband. But the simple fact remains that God has chosen, in his infinite and unchanging wisdom, to mediate his grace through the appointed means-- within the co-ordinating social system that He has appointed. If your marriage is going to get better, you will need to trust that God intends to work through your husband, without your constant and ever faithful resistance! Its just that simple-- the Bible teaches it, and history vindicates it. Many a women have had to submit to many a man that they thought unworthy of their trust. For that matter, the same principle fits our relation to the human aspects that are present in an otherwise divine institution called the church. We submit to our "Human authorities" and seek to support and work WITH them, not because the men in authority are so worthy, but because GOD IS! This is your calling as a "CHRISTIAN" wife. The scripture does not give you leverage to "submit" only when YOU judge your husband to be "Christian enough." Thats not the point of even the most simple reading of 1 Peter!

Husbands: If God is going to bless your home, He will do it through your not growing bitter against your wife because of those things YOU judge to be un-Christian about her. You are instructed to sympathize with her as you would with "weakness" and resist responding to her as if she is acting in "wickedness." You will need to extend yourself to her best interest, regardless of whether YOU judge her worthy of this. You will want even to put her interest before your own, which among other things will demand that you listen to her concerns at least to the point that you are convinced that you have all the needed advise so as to act in love. You may, at times choose to exercise your authority by submitting yourself to her opinion-- especially in such times as you have reason to believe that either she is better qualified to judge a situation or that you believe it to be such that the issue has more relevance to her than yourself. But you do not, have any privilege to act out of bitterness or selfishness and you must always consider her interest before you act. There may be times when you will in fact judge to act in such a way as your wife feels it is not to her best interest-- but if you are convinced that it is to her best interest, as relative to the other interest of your home and perhaps other responsibilities, then remember you will stand before God in your decision, since it is ultimately God you serve as the husband. Whereas you may be able to "pull the wool" of some human eyes, God is not fooled. This again, is the point of the most simple reading of 1 Peter.

Covenant # 2: Derived from God's instructions of Co-ordination:

Wife: I will "sub-ordinate" (submit) to my husband in a respectful manner-- respecting him not as I JUDGE him worthy of respect, but as the person GOD HAS CHOSEN to work through in restoring our marriage. It is the position of husband that I co-ordinate myself to as unto the Lord!

Husband: I will direct my duties and actions so as to genuinely consider the best interests of my wife, not because I JUDGE her worthy of my love, but seeking to love her even as Christ has first loved me.

Exercise: What areas do I now resolve to make my peace with so as to properly co-ordinate my life to my spouse?

3. Prescription # 3: Put on cloths

Gen. 3:21 And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

(note also how this is in effect God's provision that maintained the reaction of Adam and Eve after their sin so as to protect themselves from each other in their vulnerability or "nakedness"-- 3:10)

Explanation: In a less than perfect world, and in the absence of a perfect marriage anywhere, God in his graciousness provided garments of protection against the vulnerability that had entered into marriage due to the presence of sin. This may be considered a barrier of "space" or "covering" so as to assist marriage couples in not unnecessarily injuring one another. As this applies to marriage today, it may well imply that there is a proper emotional, psychological, vocational and temporal "space" that can be applied so as to provide the needed environment for healing. Whereas this ought not to be "separation" whereby the marriage is in effect no longer functional, and whereas this ought not to mean a non-cooperating home or a non-cooperating sexual commitment-- it may mean that each spouse is willing to give the other some freedom to having their own identity and interests, etc. This will inevitably lead to compromise in some things, which ought then to be agreed upon as indicated below.

Covenant # 3: Derived from the principle of "putting on cloths":

I resolve to allow my spouse a reasonable freedom to pursue those interests and relationships that are relative to their individual identity in so far as we both agree that they are not counter-productive to our marital oneness. We agree to seek third-party assistance on those matters that are not agreeable to both parties.

III. Conclusion: You will still need to make it your habit to Forgive One Another As Christ First Forgave You!

Eph.4:31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Col. 3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Notice that in both passages, the basis for our forgiveness has nothing whatsoever to do with our judgments concerning the other person's worthiness of our forgiveness. Rather our forgiveness is based solely upon the assumption that we were not worthy of forgiveness by God, yet in his mercy he forgave us prior to anything we did to deserve it.

Notice also in the Colossians passage that a distinction is made between "forgiving" and "bearing." The latter is commanded in such time as there is a "complaint against another." This language indicates a transgression of some "law" such as God's law so as to constitute a "sin." Perhaps then our command to "bear" as distinguished from "forgive" pertains to our being willing to make our peace with those characteristics in our spouse that are perhaps not "sinful" but all the same annoying.

Concluding Covenant: I resolve to forgive my spouse for whatever wrongs he/she has done to me up to now ( as I see it) and I commitment myself to a daily ritual of forgiving my spouse for such things as I consider to be sinful, bearing with those things that I consider to be annoying weaknesses.

#### Our Contract

I agree to each of the covenants stated in these five pages of the document "A Biblical Prescription For Couples with Marriage Problems" and promise to daily commitment myself to the fulfillment of my marriage vows as clarified by these covenants and qualified by the following list of reasonable qualifications and compromises.

Make a List of Reasonable Qualifications and/or Compromises upon which this contract is entered into by mutual agreement.

The operative word here is "reasonable." For instance, it is not "reasonable" to demand that your spouse not be a "coach potato" for instance. Rather you should work out a compromise solution to the relative concerns of watching, or not watching, TV-- whichever the case may be. It would be preferable if this list were non-existent in that the above covenants are based on principle and ought to be applied with trust. However, given the fact that certain issues might need to be resolved so as to move forward in this contract, these qualifications ought to be noted in so far as they serve to provide the needed "space" (or "clothing) as noted above.

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#### Signatures

Husband: \_\_\_\_\_

Wife: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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