

What Do You Believe?

“As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so he is.”

■ PROVERBS 23:7 (KJV)

Jody* made an appointment to discuss her marriage. When she arrived at my office, her first words were: “I want you to help me divorce my husband.” She explained, “We fight all the time, we haven’t had sex for months, we don’t do anything as a couple. All he does is work. I have no feelings for him. Nothing is left. Why carry on the charade?”

I asked her, “Why do you need my help to divorce your husband?”

Jody responded, “I want to be sure I am doing the right thing.”

I complimented her for wanting to make the right decision, and then asked: “What does being married mean to you?”

Her answer did not surprise me. “Even though Jim* and I were married in the Catholic Church,” she said, “I don’t think we knew what we were doing. To me marriage is something we enter into because we are in love. If things don’t work out we move on.” Then, she asked rhetorically, “Aren’t we

**name has been changed*

supposed to be happy?” She answered her own question: “I am not happy. It’s time for me to move on.”

Jody was about to make an important decision based on the pain she felt and her own misguided idea of what marriage is.

“Marriage is like a house plant,” she said, pointing to a vase in my office. “When a plant loses its flowers and its leaves begin to wrinkle you give it some plant food and water. You may even change the soil. You do your best to keep it alive. After that, if it continues to deteriorate, all you can do is to throw it away.”

I asked Jody to describe the status of her marriage. Using the same plant metaphor, she answered: “The blossoms are gone. The leaves are turning brown and falling. It looks very sick if not dead. I am ready to throw this plant away, but I do want it revived if possible.”

“Why would you want to revive it?” I asked.

She replied, “Jim and I have invested a lot of time and effort in this relationship. Jim has good qualities I once enjoyed. It would be nice if we could be friends again. I am also concerned about what a divorce would do for our two year old, Jackie.”

“Does your Christian faith help you in caring for your marriage?” I asked.

She answered, “I don’t really know. I know that the Catholic Church frowns on divorce.”

I pointed out that as long as she and Jim were willing to work on reviving their relationship, there was hope. I told her also that I would be glad to work with the two of them to help them care for and nurture their marriage relationship.

After my first joint meeting with Jim and Jody I wrote in their file: “This couple’s strength is what they believe about marriage, but unfortunately that is also their weakness.”

Jody and Jim believed that their marriage was important enough to seek help to save it rather than abandon it. They believed that they could be happy together again. They also believed that divorce is not to be taken lightly because it could hurt their young daughter. All of these were beliefs that encouraged them to work at the relationship.

On the other hand, they also believed that marriage is disposable. “If things don’t work out we move on,” said Jody. This was a serious weakness. The possibility of walking away came back to haunt them whenever they experienced a setback. They would think about the option of leaving instead of making the sacrifices necessary to resolve their conflicts. The lure of this option sapped their energy, keeping them from going forward.

In addition, this couple was also missing the guidance and motivation that comes from a religious belief about marriage. Although they were both Catholic, Jim and Jody did not practice their faith and thus did not understand what a Catholic marriage looks like.

▶ WHAT YOU BELIEVE SHAPES YOUR LIFE

A great deal has been written about the power of our beliefs. What you believe about your marriage and about your spouse shapes the way you treat your mate and affects how the two of you treat each other during the growing pains of your marriage. Ultimately what you believe about marriage influences whether you are happy or miserable in your relationship and whether you stay married or not.

In this chapter I want to outline some of the key beliefs about marriage that come from our Catholic tradition. Embracing these beliefs will help you find happiness in your spouse’s company. These beliefs are the reasons husbands and wives stay together, work at their differences, find fulfillment in their relationship, and enjoy each other.

1. Your Marriage Is Not Your Private Affair

I once heard an acquaintance tell a friend how she and her husband decided to get married. “When we decided to get hitched, we didn’t say a word to anyone,” she said. “Each of us had some money in the bank, and so we bought two plane tickets to Las Vegas and flew there to get mar-

ried and to have our honeymoon. When we returned home we made the announcement.”

She went on, “This is our life. We want to live it our own way! If others don’t like it, it is just too bad!” I think this attitude toward marriage is misguided.

As a married couple you are not just a man and a woman in love doing your own thing with no consideration for anyone else. Yours is a relationship with a purpose. Its mission is greater than the two of you. When you married, you accepted a special role in society. You agreed to be a vital link in the fabric of humanity. As an individual and as a married couple, your life and your love story are connected to others who came before you and are linked to those who will come after you. Your marital happiness is important not just to you, but to all of society. Your joy has a positive impact on everyone around you, and your relationship teaches your children what marriage is about. Judith Siegel, author of *What Children Learn from Their Parents’ Marriage*, writes: “The marital relationship observed by the child acts like a blueprint upon which all future intimate relationships will be built.”¹

Personally, I am grateful to my parents and grandparents for what they taught me through their example. I have learned from them that my personal life and my marriage story are not only connected to the lives of others, but are also intimately linked to God’s life and God’s love story with humanity.

2. Entering Marriage Is Saying “Yes”

My parents believed that their life as a couple had meaning and purpose because it had a place in God’s design. Although God’s plan was a mystery to them, they saw their task in life as husband and wife to say “yes” to God and God’s will. They believed that their mission in life was to let God’s purpose and mysterious plan be fulfilled through their love for each other. My parents were not perfect, but because of what they believed they learned to overcome their imperfections by relying on God for help.

My parents' view of life and of marriage evokes in me the image of God as an artist who is creating an intricate mosaic, a work of art made with thousands of tiny colored stones and gems forming a splendid design. Each one of us is like a colored pebble, a precious stone in the hands of the Artist. He sees the good and the beauty in each of us, and places us in his mosaic where we can play a unique role. Our task in life is not to try to understand God's grand plan, but to accept that God is the artist, and knows best where we belong. Our task in life as a married couple is to let him guide us to become the couple he intends for us to be.

Like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Mary and Joseph, you and your spouse as a couple have a role to play in God's mosaic by saying "yes" to him and placing your life at his service. John Paul II underscores this reality when he exhorts couples and families with the words: "Become what you are"² in God's eyes. Becoming what God intends us to be is indeed the way to our personal fulfillment. It is the source of our marital happiness.

3. Spouses Are a Gift for Each Other

We Christians believe that God intends for marriage to bring joy to the human heart. We learn this in the story of creation found in the book of Genesis. We hear that God created Adam and Eve for each other so that they could complete and perfect one another and find happiness together. When God brought Eve to Adam, the man exclaimed in joy: "This at last!" Adam was exuberant because God had given him a special gift, a person who was like himself and who could meet his deepest human needs for a companion, a helper, and a mate. Eve was a gift from God to Adam and Adam was a gift to Eve. They were made for each other: to find fulfillment in each other and happiness together.

Being a gift to each other is what God desires for you and your spouse. When you see yourselves this way, you can glimpse the promise of happiness to come.³

Being a gift is not easy, however. As with every couple, your life is the epic of two people wanting to find happiness together and struggling to achieve it. You want to give yourself to your spouse but you stumble. You can find yourself

- » short-tempered and impatient when you should be tolerant,
- » critical and sarcastic when you should be understanding,
- » demanding when you should be accommodating,
- » deceitful when you should be honest,
- » causing pain and discomfort when you should be comforting,
- » expecting to be served when you should be serving,
- » vengeful and holding a grudge when you should be forgiving,
- » self-absorbed when you should be attentive to your spouse's needs...

...and the list continues.

Such behaviors, whether intentional or not, create discomfort and tension in your relationship. They detract from the gift that you are. They make your married life feel like you are driving on a bumpy road and keep you from finding happiness.

4. Selfishness Is the Root of the Problem

In truth, many of the potentially damaging behaviors described above are present in all marriages to some degree. What is interesting about these behaviors is that, generally, they are not caused by irreconcilable differences, or by personality disorders, or by a lack of communication or conflict resolution skills. They all stem from selfishness. Selfishness is the root cause of all marital difficulties and breakups. Selfishness is:

- » choosing to do what “I” want when “I” want, without any regard for its impact on my spouse or on the relationship,
- » placing “me” at the center of our life as a couple instead of “us,”

» a fundamental attitude that causes me to turn my back on my spouse and keeps the two of us from being the gift that we are.

Selfishness is a big problem in marriage. It is like the ugly weed that sprouts in a beautiful garden. If the weed is allowed to grow unchecked it chokes every flower in the garden. If you do not control selfishness, it will disrupt your relationship to the point of overrunning it. Like a weed, it will choke the affection that you and your spouse have for each other. On the other hand, to the extent that you conquer selfishness you will experience fulfillment and joy.

To be a gift requires choosing self-*giving* instead of self-*gratification*. Doing this is especially difficult for us because we seem to have an inbred tendency to be self-centered. Thus, too often we choose to be selfish rather than make a sacrifice for our spouse and our marriage.

5. Christ Is Our Help and Our Model

Thankfully, God, who wants us to be happy, gave us his Son, Jesus, who stands by us, ready to help us overcome our weakness. The *Catechism* reminds us: “Christ dwells with them [the spouses], gives them the strength to take up their crosses and to follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens, to ‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,’ and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.”⁴

In Christ we receive not only God’s graces to help us overcome our ego-centric tendencies, but also the model of self-giving love that God intends for husbands and wives to show toward each other. Christ’s love for the church is the paradigm of marital love.⁵

Christ’s love for the people he met is described in the gospel accounts. He welcomed them, paid attention to their needs, forgave their sins, comforted and healed them, washed their feet in service of them, and he died on the cross for all of us.

Christ's acts of love define for us the qualities of Christian loving. In them we find the blueprint for building the relationship of husband and wife in a Christian marriage. When spouses follow the example of Jesus in loving each other, as Christ commanded us: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12), they are transformed into the couple that God called them to be. They become the image of God, a sacrament of divine love to each other and to their community.

► THE SOURCE OF YOUR MOTIVATION

When you believe that marriage gives you a role in society, that your commitment to each other is a response to God's invitation, that you are a gift to your spouse, that your happiness comes from overcoming selfishness, and that Christ is your help and your model for loving, then you are not likely to compare your marriage to a potted plant that can be thrown away. When you embrace these beliefs your marriage takes on a special meaning. Your motivation to stay together no longer comes from how you feel today, or from what is convenient for you, or from what is fashionable among your friends. Your motivation comes from the irrevocable commitment you made to each other, to God and to society. It comes from your knowledge that others need you and count on you to be a good husband or a good wife. It is this kind of motivation that will affect your attitudes and your behaviors, and will lead you to grow in love for each other and for God in spite of the difficulties you may encounter.

► THE BLUEPRINT

Chapters five through ten of this book identify the actions of Christ that form the blueprint for marital love. You will learn that to find the happiness your heart desires you are to

1. Welcome and accept your spouse.
2. Be attentive and truthful to your spouse.

3. Sacrifice to make room for your spouse in your life.
4. Forgive your spouse and ask for forgiveness.
5. Comfort and help your spouse to heal.
6. Serve God and your spouse generously.

As you practice these grace-filled behaviors you will overcome, with God's help, the selfish tendencies that hurt your marriage. You will become

- » patient and tolerant instead of short-tempered and demanding,
- » understanding instead of critical and sarcastic,
- » willing to accommodate your spouse's wishes instead of wanting your way,
- » honest instead of being deceitful,
- » forgiving instead of holding a grudge and seeking revenge,
- » attentive to your spouse's needs, instead of being self-absorbed.

It is through such acts of love that you and your spouse imitate Christ and create a relationship that reflects the divine life. In this relationship you will feel happy and fulfilled because you love your spouse the way God designed you to love.

▶ LISTEN TO GOD'S STORY

How God loves: Isaiah 54:5–10

How we are to love: Ephesians 5:25–33

The story of Jacob and Rachel: Genesis 29

▶ REFLECT ON YOUR STORY

- » Ask yourself: What do I believe about marriage? What does being married mean to me?

- » Which of my beliefs help me the most in my marriage? Which are a detriment to my marriage?
- » What did I learn as a child from my parents about marriage? What do I teach my children about marriage through my actions?
- » List actions of yours that you or your spouse consider to be selfish. Reflect on the impact that the repetition of these behaviors can have on your marital relationship.
- » How is your religious faith a source of strength to you in coping with the challenges of your relationship and in nurturing your marriage?
- » What role does prayer play in your relationship? Do you pray for your spouse? Do you pray together?
- » Think of the most recent time when you and your spouse enjoyed a happy moment together. What did you do that brought you joy?

► ENDNOTES

1. Siegel, Judith P., Ph.D. *What Children Learn from Their Parents' Marriage*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000, p. xvi.
2. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, #17.
3. "Love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness." Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #2.
Also: "In the joys of their love and family life he [Christ] gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1642.
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1642.
Also: "By the very fact that the faithful give such consent, they open up for themselves a treasure of sacramental grace from which they draw supernatural power for their fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully." Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, #40.
5. "Christ has revealed this truth in the Gospel by his presence at Cana in Galilee, by the sacrifice of the cross and the sacraments of his church. Husbands and wives thus discover in Christ the point of reference for their spousal love." John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, #19.