

CLOSE COMPANIONS

by

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Theme: The close companionship of a husband and wife in marriage helps them to be better equipped to face and endure whatever crises life may bring.

Theme Text: Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:28-30; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Presentation Notes: The notes presented in this section do not constitute a prepared sermon script. The following helps are designed to offer a framework, supportive resources, and illustrations toward the development of a sermon on the stated theme. You will want to shape these ideas in your own style, drawing upon your own study and experience, to meet the particular needs of your congregation. Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called *Sermon Illumination* that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

Through the years, marriage has meant different things to different people. At times, marriage has served the purpose of joining two communities, nations, or groups together (See Gen. 34:9, 10, 16). For some, marriage has been the means of obtaining legal offspring to perpetuate the family name (See Gen. 30:3-5). Some have wed for the material help, economic security, support or status marriage would provide (See Prov.31:10-29). (1) Sexual lust has been another motivation for marriage (Judges 14:2, 3; 2 Sam. 11:2-4). The need to be dependent upon someone, the need to care for someone, the need to have power over someone, or the need to escape an oppressive situation in one's family—all have been factors in the reasons others have married.

One Flesh: A Couple Identity

At the heart of the divine design for marriage is the nurture, the emotional and spiritual support, which the couple provide for each other as their lives come together. Throughout Scripture we find the oneness, the couple life of the married pair addressed from different perspectives, all of which combine to give us an understanding of God's plan for oneness in marriage.

Marriage as partnership. The account of the first marriage followed the divine recognition of the human being's solitary situation, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). The helper (Hebrew ezer) is one who offers encouragement and strength in the human realm just as God provides help and support as our divine Helper (Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps. 70:5; 121:1, 2) "Companion" or "partner" (New English Bible) accurately conveys the meaning. (2) **Marriage as one-flesh.** In the pronouncement of Gen. 2:24, God indicates the special relationship which He intends for marriage, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." God's intent for marriage was the formation of a new entity. Their "one flesh" is an intimate union, the formation of a new, unique organism characterized by loving attachment. (3, 4) Jesus reaffirmed and amplified the Genesis text. He gave special attention to the idea of two being one. Citing the Genesis

passages which described how God brought together the first husband and wife, He concluded, "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:6).

Marriage as covenant. The marital union rests on a covenant, a solemn pledge of agreement which husband and wife make with each other before God and their human community (Mal. 2:14; compare Prov. 2:17). The marriage covenant calls for the highest form of choice-making. It is a commitment which, paradoxically, represents a choice to give up some choices (Stanley, 1998). The words of the woman in the Song of Solomon, "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song of Sol. 2:16 KJV) and "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song of Sol. 6:3 KJV) speak of this kind of commitment and may reflect actual words used by couples at that time in making their wedding pledge.

Marriage as wholistic oneness. "One flesh" includes the physical joining of husband and wife sexually. This is part of God's created plan for men and women within the covenant of marriage. He pronounced maleness and femaleness as "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and, despite humankind's fall into sin, He has not changed His mind. The Creator intended married sexuality to provide a joyful, pleasurable union of husband and wife (Prov. 5:18, 19). (5, 6) Joining together physically, however, is never just a purely physical act. "In the Biblical view, human beings are always considered as psychophysical wholes. They cannot be split into separate parts of soul and body, mind and spirit. They are always one, with the whole person engaged in any act." (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 157). The physical union symbolizes a comprehensive intertwining of two hearts and two spirits. "God does not . . . wish us to join bodies without joining lives" (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 160). (7)

Marriage as a sacred circle. The married pair have a boundary around them which sets them apart from other couples. E. G. White refers to this boundary as a "sacred circle" (The Ministry of Healing, p. 361). However, husbands and wives do not cease to be individual persons. Marriage does not replace personhood. (8) It is important to remember that also, the sacred circle, which establishes parameters around the married couple, is not intended to be a rigid barrier which cuts the couple off from support. (9)

Marriage as a new "us" creation. Scott Stanley summarizes the concept of oneness in marriage: "It's not as if the two are to become one blob, wherein one or both identities are lost. Rather, the two form a new, highly prized identity of 'us' that is to be nurtured and protected" (1998, p. 8).

Growing in Oneness

Effects of sin. Sin profoundly affects God's design for "one flesh" in marriage. Couple life cannot exist without the investment of the two in the relationship, yet the togetherness of many couples has suffered because of self-centeredness on the part of the husband or wife. Self-interest has overshadowed the mutuality of dedication, service and support toward one another that should be present. Sin resulted in struggles for control by one over the other.

Marriage is a beneficiary of the gospel. The good news is that Christ has bridged the gulf between humanity and God and the gulf between human beings which was created by sin (2 Cor. 5:18, 19) and marriage is a beneficiary. "Marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty" (Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, p. 64). The walls that divide us have been surmounted by Christ. Paul declares that all male-female gender conflicts, which are often expressed in the home as well as in the Church and in society, have been transcended in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Paul exalted the crucified Christ as the source of reconciliation (Eph. 2:14-18). What is true for all alienated relationships is true also for marriage: "To create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace" (Eph. 2:15 NEB). We are reconciled in "one body" (Eph. 2:16).

That is the spiritual fact upon which the apostle can say that there is now "one" where there was "two." In Christ the way is open for couples to experience "one flesh" as God intended in ways they could not know apart from Him. (10) The call of the gospel is for us to grow up into Christ in all things (Eph. 4:15).

Vital signs of a healthy oneness. We want our marriage relationships to be healthy, strong and growing in Christ. What are the "vital signs" that we can monitor to evaluate marital health? In *Traits of a Lasting Marriage*, long-time Christian counselors, authors and relationship seminar leaders Jim and Sally Conway (1991) list ten characteristics reported by 186 middle-aged Christian couples in the U.S.A. as being significant to a lasting healthy marriage: (1) lifelong commitment, (2) mutually satisfying communication, (3) spiritual vitality, (4) effective conflict resolution, (5) energy from friends, (6) sexual intimacy, (7) time to laugh and play, (8) realistic expectations, (9) serving each other and sharing leadership, (10) personal growth. Let us check the pulse of our marriages as we look specifically at the top four of these characteristics.

- *Lifelong commitment.* Commitment is a positive decision made by a couple to stay together, to love and affirm each other, to grow as persons, and to make their marriage an expression of their desire for each other's happiness (Conway, 1991). Numerous authors and researchers have found commitment to be a high priority in successful marital relationships. (11) Commitment is closely related to the Biblical concept of covenant. Jack and Judith Balswick (1991) see optimal marital functioning as being modeled after the characteristics of God's relationship with humanity. Foremost among these is commitment that is "based upon a mature (i.e., unconditional and bilateral) covenant" (p. 33). (12)

- *Mutually satisfying communication.* One researcher, Dr. Roy Rhodes, a Dallas, Texas psychologist, reveals that the average couple married ten years or more spends only 37 minutes a week in close communication (Conway, 1991). Communication "is not simply the ability to talk; it also implies that you are understood and accepted by the other person [It] includes a willingness to share myself with another person and a desire to understand that other person" (Conway, 1991, p. 64). God created the first couple to be naked and unashamed—emotionally, as well as physically. Sin drove human beings into hiding, from God and from each other. By His grace, and with the development of better skills that do not come naturally, we can shed this inherited legacy of hiding our inner selves behind tattered fig leaf garments and become more open and vulnerable with each other. (13)

- *Spiritual vitality.* This refers to "a faith beyond ourselves, a trust in a personal God who loves us and is concerned for our best good. This faith is an intimate personal relationship, as opposed to the mere acceptance of a certain creed or belonging to a religious organization" (Conway, 1991, p. 86). Research indicates that couples who are more religiously inclined and from same-faith backgrounds have an edge when it comes to keeping marriages strong and avoiding divorce (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). (14)

- *Effective conflict resolution.* In contrast to types of marriages where one spouse is subordinate to the other or where spouses are seldom expected to interact at a personal level, a "one flesh" companionship-type marriage encourages couples, as equal partners, to move ever closer emotionally to each other to become more and more open and vulnerable with each other. Yet with increasing closeness, conflict inevitably develops. This paradox is confusing and is accompanied by sufficient pain to turn many couples away from the pursuit of greater intimacy.

"Conflict resolution is the vital key to effective growth in love and intimacy," wrote David Mace, pioneer marital therapist and founder of the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (Mace, 1982, p. 30). We are blessed today to have many Christian counselors and marital growth specialists providing training in interpersonal relationship skills. By God's grace they are helping couples to recognize and avoid potential conflicts, to resolve conflict earlier and with less trauma, and to understand marital conflict in a new way—as a stepping stone to better understanding and

growth in intimacy. Let us not abandon God's call to one flesh intimacy; let us avail ourselves of tools and skills now available to us that will encourage us. (15)

Facing Life as a Team

As a Christian marriage researcher, Scott Stanley tells us, "People who are the most comfortable thinking in terms of 'we' tend to be the most dedicated and happy in their marriages" (1998, p. 162). "Marriage is about commingled lives. Marriage is about sharing and learning to share more. Marriage is about teamwork" (p. 165).

Becoming a team. E. G. White wrote, "To gain a proper understanding of the marriage relation is the work of a lifetime. . . . However carefully and wisely marriage may have been entered into, few couples are completely united when the marriage ceremony is performed. The real union of the two in wedlock is the work of the afteryears" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 105). Developing an understanding of marriage as "we"—as teamwork—is a significant part of becoming "completely united." Some couples have a remarkable grasp of the concept from the beginning; for others, such a sense of togetherness is reached slowly, often painfully. Sadly, some never really grasp what being a team is about. May the Spirit inspire each of us as couples today, to reflect on our experience and grow together in this area of oneness.

Illustration. Randy and June were career professionals who had married each other in their early thirties. Dedicated, hardworking, successful individuals and proud of it, they had little time for church or for God, though they considered themselves Christians. Married life was good at first.

They enjoyed exercising, hiking, talking and listening to music together. However, they remained highly individualistic in their thinking. Five years into their marriage, two crises developed. First, June's company decided to move across the country. When she announced her desire to move, Randy didn't want to discuss it. "When I married you, I never agreed to give up my career," he declared. "That's like my whole life, what I've worked for all these years!" June retorted that her career was as important as his. As they struggled with the question of whether their commitment to marriage would triumph over their commitment to work, the second crisis came. June discovered she was pregnant. She hesitated to tell Randy, but then she thought, "Enough of this 'me versus you business.'" He was the father; he needed to know.

Randy's first reaction was anger. Then he started looking for solutions, "What are our options?" he asked, with obvious implications. His selfishness and reluctance to be on a marriage team showed. June was devastated. Abortion was not an option for her. Her response of immense pain triggered something in Randy. That day he began for the first time to ponder the need to let go of his self-interest. He prayed at work throughout the day, and so did she.

That evening he came to June having done a turnabout in his mind set. Expressing regret for his earlier attitude, he confessed, "I wanted all the best of what we could have together without really wanting to be together. I don't think being married is all about me or you; it needs to be about us. I don't know how to do 'us,' but I'm willing to start learning. . . . I think I wanted this marriage only as long as it was good for both of us. I don't believe that's commitment. I want commitment. I want you to know I'll be by your side, no matter what we decide to do. Will you *be married with me*? I mean, you and me together."

June responded with tears and hugs. The couple took what could have been the end of their marriage and made it the beginning of a new life together (Stanley, 1998. Adapted).

Fortified to face crises. The importance of a married couple's sense of covenant oneness with each other, together with their commitment to God, cannot be overstated. It is significant for their spiritual growth (2 Cor. 6:14; Compare Amos 3:3). It is significant for their parenting. "Parents are to work together as a unit" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 312; Compare Gen. 27). Further, in the midst of life's crises, their oneness is their best fortification.

Illustration. Patrick Morley tells how his wife's sister and her husband faced the trauma of breast cancer. Nancy's annual mammogram revealed a spot that required a biopsy. Fearing the worst, Nancy had asked that the surgeon call her husband Hal with the news of the biopsy results, rather than herself. After an excruciating week of waiting, Hal got the bad news. He had never been so scared. What would he do if he lost Nancy?

He held the grim report within himself all day and through the evening, even as he and Nancy kept an appointment to dine out with friends. When they were alone at last, he drew her close and began, "The doctor called me. We need to have surgery. They did find some cancer." His use of "we" said paragraphs. They were silent and wept in each other's arms for long minutes. At last, Hal whispered, "Nancy, I feel a love for you right now like I've never felt before."

The mastectomy was successful. Hal slept in her hospital room, helped her in and out of bed, ran errands for her, cleaned up when her medicine made her nauseous. "We felt a new closeness," says Nancy. "For the first two months we would just hug and hold each other all the time. Hal said to me, 'You'll never know how much I love you and how courageous I think you are.' That really ministered to me. I realize how precious life is every day. I look at my husband and kids differently. I thank the Lord for giving me life!"

Morley concludes, "When the body of the wife is sick, so is the body of the husband. They are one flesh. When the body of the husband takes ill, so does the body of the wife. They are one flesh. We belong to each other, as we belong to the Lord. How important it is for your mate to have an assurance that you will be there in the dark hour of illness." (Adapted from *Devotions for Couples* by Patrick Morley. Copyright ©1994 by Patrick M. Morley. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. Available at your local bookstore or by calling 800-727-3480)

Conclusion

In the book of Ecclesiastes we find these beautiful lines about being in partnership: Two are better than one; they receive a good reward for their toil, because, if one falls, the other can help his companion up again; but alas for the man who falls alone with no partner to help him up. And, if two lie side by side, they keep each other warm; but how can one keep warm by himself? If a man is alone, an assailant may overpower him, but two can resist; and a cord of three strands is not quickly snapped. (Ecc. 4:9-12 NEB)

These verses affirm God's assessment that it is not good for human beings to be alone. Good friendships are so important to the nurture and support that we need as individuals. May God help us to reach out in friendship to others.

And how wonderful are these lines in praise of the companionship a loving Creator designed for marriage! May God open our eyes that we may see how we can be a source of encouragement to one another. May God grant us the strength and ability to lift one another, nurture one another, and keep one another warm! (16) May God help us to team together in facing whatever challenges life brings to us. Sometimes, we may have to walk alone in our marriages. If such is your situation, be assured that, through your personal relationship with God, you can do much.

When, however, partners are linked with each other and with God, that threefold cord is indestructible.

One (1): "Neither Roman nor Greek civilizations provided an atmosphere that elevated the marital union. The Greek statesman, Demosthenes (3000 B.C.), indicated that it might take several of this lesser order of being—woman—to take care of man's needs: 'Mistresses we keep for pleasure, concubines for daily attendance upon our person, wives to bear us legitimate children and be our faithful housekeepers.' The wife could be repudiated and simply dismissed for barrenness or even if her husband found her unattractive or uncongenial" (Mazat, 1996, p. 20).

Two (2): "'Helper' is a relational term describing a beneficial relationship, but in itself does not specify position or rank, either superiority or inferiority" (Davidson, 1988, p. 15).

Three (3): "Eve was created from a rib taken from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, nor to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side as an equal, to be loved and protected by him. A part of man, bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh, she was his second self; *showing the close union and the affectionate attachment that should exist in this relation*" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 25, emphasis supplied).

Four (4): "The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ's words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism—for that is what the words 'one flesh' would be in modern English. And the Christians believe that when He said this he was not expressing a sentiment but stating a fact—just as one is stating a fact when one says that a lock and its key are one mechanism, or that a violin and a bow are one musical instrument. The inventor of the human machine was telling us that its two halves, the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined" (C. S. Lewis, quoted in Brown & Brown, 1980, p. 139).

Five (5): "The woman was made from the rib of the man—originally they were one—and after the creation of the woman they long to become one again" (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 155).

Six (6): "All we are as male or female becomes open to the other, and is made complete by being joined with the inner self of one's mate. We know each other and become one with the other and are fulfilled by each other in a way otherwise utterly impossible, and that knowing and that fulfillment carry over into our whole married life, and strengthen and deepen and periodically refresh it" (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 162).

Seven (7): Through this unitive aspect of sexuality, the perpetuation of the human family is provided for as well. In God's plan, procreation is entwined with and springs from the same act of marital union whereby husband and wife find joy, pleasure and physical completeness. It is to a husband and wife whose love has enabled them to know each other in such a sexual bond that the creation of a new life may be entrusted. Their child is a special expression of their oneness, an offspring of their "one flesh."

Eight (8): "Neither the husband nor the wife should merge his or her individuality in that of the other. Each has a personal relation to God. . . . Let the wealth of your affection flow forth to Him who gave His life for you. Make Christ first and last and best in everything. As your love for Him becomes deeper and stronger, your love for each other will be purified and strengthened" (*The*

Ministry of Healing, p. 361).

Nine (9): The cells of the human body have boundaries which identify and protect them. They also interact with other cells and organisms within the body. The sacred circle around a couple should not become a wall behind which the couple or family are trapped. Excessive isolation can deprive the marriage and the family of much needed companionship and interaction with others—interaction which will help sustain and enhance their life together. The family, though a private entity to be sure, is also dependent upon networks around it for life support. Interactive caring and support among members and households (Acts 2:46; 4:32; Gal. 6:2; James 5:10) characterizes the families of the early Church.

Ten (10): "In the most intimate relationships of life, in our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, in married love, and in our duty to the community, direct relationships are impossible. Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships . . . nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife . . . stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 86 quoted in Anderson and Guernsey, 1985, p. 142).

Eleven (11): "A deep level of commitment and strong interest in promoting each other's happiness and welfare" was among the top qualities of 130 Oklahoma (USA) couples who rated themselves very high in terms of marital satisfaction (Stinnett, Chesser & Defrain, 1979). See also Achtemeier, 1976; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Smedes, 1988; Stanley, 1998.

Twelve (12): "When answering the survey question about whether a commitment to stay married had helped hold their marriage together, one husband said, 'Especially my wife's! There were times when my commitment wavered—hers never did, even when I was most unbearable.' "This man, with a graduate degree and a high income, had suffered from such severe emotional problems during mid-life that he separated from his wife and was finally hospitalized with a breakdown. During his hospitalization, his wife visited him faithfully and did all she could to aid his recovery. After his release, they were officially reunited and have now been married a total of thirty years" (Conway, 1991, pp. 43, 44).

Thirteen (13): Many books on marriage, including those listed in the References below, contain helpful sections on communication. For an in-depth, user friendly textbook on communication, see Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1991.

Fourteen (14): "If Christ indeed is formed within, the hope of glory, there will be union and love in the home. Christ abiding in the heart of the wife will be at agreement with Christ abiding in the heart of the husband. They will be striving together for the mansions Christ has gone to prepare for those who love Him" (*The Adventist Home*, p. 120).

Fifteen (15): You may wish to make available the resource article "Creative Conflict Resolution," included with this planbook.

Sixteen (16): Christian clinical psychologist and marriage researcher Scott Stanley writes, "On the day that I married Nancy, our pastor added a vow into the ceremony that we had not talked about beforehand. He had me promise to keep Nancy warm. Of all that was said and done that day, those were the words that stood out to me, Nancy, and my mother. Promising to keep Nancy warm encompasses so much" (Stanley, 1998, p. 42).

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