

YOUR MARRIAGE: HOW IT SHAPES THE NEXT GENERATION

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Theme: When the Spirit of Christ resides in the hearts of a husband and wife, their marriage can be a powerful influence to mold the lives of children and guide them toward positive values.

Theme Text: Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:4; Deut. 6:6, 7

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

A focus on Christian marriage must recognize at the outset that, while marriage is God's general plan, it is not His only plan. Many members in our midst love and serve the Lord faithfully as singles, making profound contributions to the nurture and outreach of the church. We also recognize that for some individuals, the very mention of the word "marriage" brings discomfort, even great pain because of their experience in marriage, or their contact with others in marital difficulty.

Marriage suffered a great tragedy at the fall of our first parents into sin. Since then the tendency to exploit or dominate one another, which is the characteristic of sin, has brought suffering into the lives of many a marriage partner. Hostility, abuse, violence, lust and unfaithfulness have marred many marriages and destroyed others. The ideal of an exclusive lifelong relationship between one man and one woman eludes many who try today. And some, who long for marital companionship, never know that joy.

- Yet, because Jesus comforts the brokenhearted, we rejoice that His Spirit can bring a deep sense of personal fulfillment to those who have wanted to marry and have been unable to do so.
- Because His gospel enables us to be healed, to forgive and to begin again, we lift up to Him for encouragement and extend ourselves in support to those who have experienced such trauma as to bring about divorce or separation.
- Because grace redeems what Satan has corrupted, we have hope today for what His grace may do in the lives of couples who are discouraged or disappointed in marriage right now, who continue to live together, but who would like to experience better resolution of conflicts, deeper appreciation and respect for each other, and a revival of the flame of romance.
- We celebrate what He is doing to bring spiritual growth and enrichment to the lives of so many married couples.

What is the significance of significance of Christian marriage to the lives of children. Let us bring three texts together:

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives."

Titus 2:4 "Admonish the . . . women to love their husbands."

Deut. 6:6, 7 "And these words which I command you today . . . you shall teach them diligently to

your children."

Christian love in the hearts of a husband and wife makes their marriage a powerful influence for good in the lives of their children.

The Significance of Marriage to the Family

When human beings live closely together, they each contribute to the environment in which they all live. This environment influences each one's thinking and behavior. In the rearing of children, the family environment has a crucial effect in the development of the child's attitude toward himself, toward others, even toward God. (1), (2)

In a two-parent family, the marriage relationship is a dominant influence upon the family environment. Not only do father and mother make it likely that the family's physical needs for food, clothing, shelter and security will be met, but their relationship with their children and even more so *their relationship with each other* determines in a profound way how their children's emotional needs will be supplied. If Christ's love has made their marriage fragrant, its aroma will permeate throughout the whole family. "Mutual affection between husband and wife will be to the family what the heating system is to a house. It will maintain the relationship of all family members in a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere."—David and Vera Mace, *In the Presence of God*, p. 109.

Thus, the effectiveness parents have in transmitting the values that are important to them to their children is related to the bond of love they share as a couple. If we would "teach diligently" our children, husbands must love their wives and wives their husbands.

Marriage Qualities that Enhance Values Transmission

Marriage and family enrichment specialist Jim Larson lists several qualities of a family environment that have a positive impact on the moral development of children and which we should strive for in our families: an environment that is *loving, empathic, and just*. (Larson, p. 100.) When these qualities reside in the marriage relationship, they will tend to shape the total family environment.

Loving. Bonds formed with warm and loving parents tend to cause children to imitate them more so than unloving parents. Such an environment also causes children to be more willing to learn and become more positive and confident than a hostile or frightening environment. (3)
In the vital arena of sexual values, love of parents for each other plays a crucial role. (4) Children in homes where love is expressed will be more able to trust parents as sources of information and feel comfortable, even willing, to ask questions and reveal the experiences, feelings, and fears of their growing years.

"If the husband and wife would only continue to cultivate these attentions which nourish love, they would be happy in each other's society and would have a sanctifying influence upon their families."—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character and Personality*, p. 158.

What might these "attentions which nourish love" be?

- Kind words of appreciation, a loving touch, a happy smile offered to each other in the presence of the children
- A note or card written by one to the other which children know about or which might be read when they are present
- A gift given which children watch being unwrapped perhaps a romantic surprise planned by one for the other with the help of the children.

Empathic. To be empathic is to enter into another's feelings. (5) A family with empathy is concerned about each other's needs and feelings as well as being concerned about behavior. While behavior is important, an empathic family gives more consideration to understanding the "why" of the behavior. Each is moved by the human needs and feelings of the others and is willing to make changes as necessary to enable one another to enjoy respect and dignity as persons. The principle for this is that of Phil. 2:4, "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

"If the parents would enter more fully into the feelings of their children and draw out what is in their hearts, it would have a beneficial influence upon them."—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 190.

Many researchers are convinced that empathy is the most important contribution a family can make to its children's values and that empathy can be developed at a fairly young age. Children appreciate having their feelings cared for, and will more likely respond in a positive way when a parent says, "Billy, when the ball is thrown at sister, it hurts her."

Ultimately, empathy is caught rather than taught. When we take children on our laps and communicate with them at the feeling level it helps to build into them the idea that their feelings and the feelings of others are important. Instead of the more rough and impersonal, "It's time to take your nap and that's that!" we can say more gently and with regard for feelings, "It really makes you upset when naptime comes and you have to interrupt your play for a little while." Dwelling in an empathic environment helps children learn to look outside of themselves and become more attentive and mindful of others. Again, if father and mother have a relationship which models empathy, it will set the tone for learning this value. (6) Empathic listening specialist Gleam Powell assures us of the benefits to marriage empathy brings:

"When I am speaking and my spouse is listening empathically, I feel very, very good. . . . I feel understood, respected, cherished.

"When I listen empathically to my partner, I benefit as well. . . . I feel closer to him, more a part of him.

"Whenever spouses express to each other what they appreciate about one another, they increase and underline their mutual caring. . . . We feel warm and secure about ourselves, our spouses, and our marriages."—Gleam S. Powell, *Listening and Loving*, pp. 34, 45.

Just. A just environment gives equal consideration for all family members. "Nothing has more influence on the development of moral judgment than participation in a just environment."—Ted Ward, *Values Begin at Home*, p. 75.

Children perceive their environment is just when

- the feelings and opinions of every family member are respected.
- rules or guidelines are consistently applied without double standards.
- family members are allowed and encouraged to participate in family decision-making, such as those regarding rules.

Jesus treated children with respect as persons (Matt. 19:14). Paul taught that youthfulness was not to be a source of disdain (1 Tim. 4:12). "Remember that your sons and daughters are younger members of God's family." "Children . . . are miniature men and women, younger members of the Lord's family."—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, pp. 161, 358.

Children pick up quickly on attitudes between father and mother which are unjust, critical, or

disrespectful and reflect these in their own attitudes and behavior. As a result they may lose respect for one or both parents, or may imitate these unjust attitudes and actions when relating to parents, siblings, or others outside the home. A child may identify with the parent who is being unjustly treated with the result that his or her own emotional wellbeing is affected. A young man feels respected when his father is respected by his mother. A young woman feels respected when her mother is respected by her father.

Marriage contributes to a just family environment when just attitudes and behaviors are present in the relationship of husband and wife.

- Maintaining confidence in each other and refraining from criticism by one of the other in the presence of the children. "Perfect confidence should exist between husband and wife. Together they should work for the highest good of their children. Never should they in the presence of the children criticize each other's plans or question each other's judgment."—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 393, 394.
- Treating each other as equals. "Eve was created from a rib from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, not 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."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 46. "Woman should fill the position which God originally designed for her, as her husband's equal."—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 231.
- Working to resolve conflicts and differences. A conflict-free environment may be desirable, but unrealistic, since some conflict is inevitable in a close relationship. By discovering the values, needs and the hurt feelings which have triggered the conflict, a couple can learn something important about their relationship, make adjustments and grow. An environment where conflicts and differences go unresolved is toxic to the couple and their children. Children need the assurance of resolution of conflicts between their parents.
- Accepting responsibility, asking forgiveness, saying, "I'm sorry." Children also need some exposure to the process whereby conflicts are resolved and hurts healed. They need to hear their parents make apologies, ask for forgiveness and receive forgiveness.

One Good Marriage Makes a Difference

The growing epidemic of marital difficulties and break-up means that growing numbers of young people are without examples for healthy Christian marriage. They lack models of Christian love and commitment enacted in the lives of couples, models which show how to undertake the often difficult work of listening, understanding, accepting and adjusting, of resolving conflicts in ways in which no one loses but both win, models of how their Christian love enables their romantic and friendship love to blossom in ever more beautiful ways.

Though our human lives in marriage will but dimly reflect it, God has provided us with a model of the perfect marriage partner, as we view Him in relationship to His bride, the Church. Throughout the pages of Scripture we find Him (Is. 54:5; Jer. 31:32; 2 Cor. 11:2) as a loving spouse who shows love and care, exhibits tender regard for the feelings of His partner, treats her with dignity and respect, allows full freedom of choice, entreating her rather than forcing a response from her. Through all the difficulties of the relationship, He keeps His covenant and makes great personal sacrifices to maintain their union. With great pain does He acknowledge His spouse's choice to end the relationship (Matt. 23:37, 38).

Each married couple constitutes a witnessing unit to exhibit by God's grace and power the divine qualities in human relationships. "Our sphere of influence may seem narrow, our ability small, our opportunities few, our acquirements limited; yet wonderful possibilities are ours through a faithful use of the opportunities of our own homes."—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 355. To

our own children and those children of other families who pass through our homes, our marriages may be a witness and an inspiration that will exert a wonderful power on human hearts and lives. (7)

Conclusion

Some can thank God today for the homes in which they grew up and for the marriages their parents worked to create that were wholesome, happy and growing relationships. Others have not such positive examples to look back upon. However, wherever we are, we can determine at this point to be transitional persons and, with God's help, to be positive influences for Christ to make better the relationships in which we find ourselves and to be a source of blessing for those whose lives are touched by ours.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Importance of family environment upon children. "Study after study has shown that the family environment is the most critical factor in effecting children's self-esteem, success in marriage and family life, and achievement in jobs. In fact, family environment—the quality of relationships within the family—seem to be more important than level of income, degree of intelligence, social status, or any other factor."—Jim Larson, *Rights, Wrongs and In-Betweens: Guiding Our Children to Christian Maturity*, p. 100.

Two (2): Importance of relationship to parents to emotional and spiritual development of children. "A person's image of God is often patterned after his image of his own parents, especially his father. If his parents were happy, loving, accepting, and forgiving, he finds it easier to experience a positive and satisfying relationship with God. But if his parents were cold and indifferent, he may feel that God is far away and disinterested in him personally. If his parents were angry, hostile, and rejecting, he often feels that God can never accept him. If his parents were hard to please, he usually has the nagging notion that God is not very happy with him either."—Richard L. Strauss, *How to Raise Confident Children*, pp. 23, 24.

Three (3): Effects of a loving environment. "Studies have shown a warm and loving parent will be imitated more than an unloving parent. And children who live in positive, accepting environments have been found to be more willing to learn and will generally be more positive and confident than children living in environments that are hostile and frightening. "Children who have positive self-esteem are usually from homes where they feel loved, wanted, and appreciated."—Jim Larson, *Rights, Wrongs, and In-Betweens: Guiding Our Children to Christian Maturity*, p. 100.

Four (4): Love of parents a primary in children's healthy sexual development. "It is not simply a pretty phrase, 'the best thing mothers and fathers can do for their children is to love one another.' It is a truism which is particularly applicable to helping children to get a well-balanced and sensitive picture of sexuality, always associated in their minds with love, commitment, and responsibility."—Alberta Mazat, *That Friday in Eden*, p. 141.

Five (5): Empathy: awareness of others' feelings and needs. "A morally maturing person is . . .

. one who has a developing awareness of the feelings and needs of others. There is a sensitivity to the consequence of personal behavior on others. A moral person is learning to consider the viewpoints of others in deciding the best or most moral way to act."—Jim Larson, *Rights, Wrongs, and In-Betweens: Guiding Our Children*, p. 101.

Six (6): Empathy is "caught" rather than "taught". After attending classes in communication and learning about how to listen empathically by reflecting another's feelings, a couple determined to use it in their communication with each other. One morning as the family was together, the husband, walking barefoot about the house, stubbed his toe on a chair leg. When he cried out in pain, his wife resisted her usual, "If you'd watch where you're going you wouldn't stub your toe," or "Why don't you wear your houseshoes (slippers)?" or "If you'd stay out of the kitchen while I'm sweeping the floor you wouldn't bump into things" and tried a more empathic response: "O darling, that must really hurt!"

Later that day as the children were playing together, the younger son dropped a heavy object on his foot. As he screamed and yelped and hopped around on one foot, the couple could not help noting the response of their older son to him. Instead of, "You're so clumsy, why didn't you ask me help you?" or "If you wouldn't try to carry so much all at one time . . .," he responded, "O Billy, that must really hurt. Let me see how badly you hurt your foot!"

Seven (7): The influence of one good marriage. Lynda Barry "grew up on the last street before a garbage ravine where people from other places drove up to dump old refrigerators and mattresses and bodies of dogs and other trash." But her physical surroundings weren't the only parts of her life in disarray. Things weren't going so well in her family either. She had seen her father make a bedroom for himself in the basement, and though few words were exchanged, she knew that wasn't good.

About that time a family moved into the neighborhood that was different. Though obviously they moved there because they couldn't move anywhere else, so they had plenty in common with everyone else, there was something about Mrs. Taylor and her home that drew kids like a magnet. When they brought her flowers, even if they were only weeds torn up by the roots, she seemed genuinely delighted. She smiled a lot, and hugged a lot. She took the kids to church and talked to them about God. She even knew how to make work fun. As Lynda tells it, "Most of the kids on my street saw things like this on TV or read about it at school, but for the most part it seemed like a lost practice from an ancient tribe. Almost all of us had parents who were deep in various sorts of trouble and they just could not remember how to do this anymore. Mrs. Taylor was about the only remaining evidence of purely affectionate contact for no good reason between adult and child, and I have no doubt that a lot of credit for the sanity of the kids who grew up in my neighborhood is due to her."

Early one morning, drawn irresistibly to the Taylor doorstep, Lynda knocked and invited herself to breakfast. Surprised, but not disturbed, Mrs. Taylor set an extra plate at the table. Lynda remembers, "I'll never forget that morning, sitting at their table eating eggs and toast, watching them talk to each other and smile. How Mr. Taylor made a joke and Mrs. Taylor laughed. How she put her hand on his shoulder as she poured coffee and how he leaned his face down to kiss it. And that was all I needed to see. I only needed to see it once to be able to believe for the rest of my life that happiness between two people can exist. And I remember Sammy walking in and crawling up onto his father's lap, leaning his head into his dad's green coveralls like doing that was the most ordinary thing in the world. Even if it wasn't happening in my house, I knew that just being near it counted for something."

Mrs. Taylor was an artist, at least she made posters and backdrops for the church. But in the minds of the children who flowed through her home, she was a Michelangelo. Once when she let Lynda make one of the shining lines coming out from the cross on a backdrop she was creating,

Lynda vowed she was going to grow up and be a great artist just like Mrs. Taylor. And she did. But far more significantly, she grew up like Mrs. Taylor in more important ways. And faith passed from one generation to the next.—Adapted from Lynda Barry, "Guardian Neighbor," *Newsweek*, Special Edition (Summer, 1991), pp. 70-73.

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