

Before You Marry

This month I'm going to dispense some pre-marital advice. There are many things that go into healthy and satisfying relationships, but here are arguably the three most important things to consider before you marry someone.

1. Priority on God. You may hope that your beloved will grow to love God like you do, but if they are not already as committed as you to putting your relationship with God first then you will have ongoing conflict. **2. Active or Passive Response to Problems.** Some people are willing to sacrifice and struggle to bring about change. They see problems and set about seeking solutions. Other respond to problems by trying to accept them. They would like things better, but they are not willing to actually make changes. It's an eternal battle if one is working to change and the other is resisting. **3. Resolving the Emotions Behind Conflict.** Couples must be able to recognize, share and address the emotional content behind conflict. Repeated conflict is never about the facts, opinions and decisions; it is about the emotions and fears behind the argument. If a couple cannot deal with those emotions directly, then the emotions will stay in charge and the conflict will continue.

How important are these? I would say don't get married until these are settled. If you can't make the changes needed BEFORE you get married, then there is no reason to think you will change after you tie the knot. However, if you hammer these out beforehand, you will deepen your connection and demonstrate that you are already doing all three.

An expanded version of this article can be found at www.petersburgcpchurch.org

Expanded

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This month I'm going to dispense some pre-marital advice. There are many things that go into healthy and satisfying relationship, but here are arguable the three most important things to consider before you marry someone.

1. Priority on God. You may hope that your beloved will grow to love God like you do, but if they are not already as committed as you to putting your relationship with God first then you will have ongoing conflict. The Bible advises that believers to not be bound to unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14. Marriage is a partnership; it works best when both husband and wife are submitted and devoted to the Lord.

Fully committed disciples of Christ will accept the impossible roles of husband and wife outlined in Scriptures like Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18-19 and I Peter 3:1-11. In these texts husbands are instructed to love their wives with selfless, sacrificial service and leadership. Wives are instructed to respect their husbands and to honor them by how she responds to him. I say these are impossible because apart from your submission to the Holy Spirit you will not be able to attain them.

2. Active or Passive Response to Problems. Some people are willing to sacrifice and struggle to bring about change. They see problems and set about seeking solutions. These are active problem solvers. Other respond to problems passively by trying to accept and tolerate them. They would like things

better, but they are not willing to actually take action to bring about change. They are usually very accepting of others and have a high tolerance for discomfort.

If you have two active people, both will pitch in to change things. If you have two passive people, they will both try to accept and accommodate their misfortune. But it's an eternal battle if one is working to change and the other is resisting. The most corrosive and painful emotional experience is when you are suffering and your loved one does not respond to your pleas for help. This only happens when one person is active and their partner is passive.

3. Resolving the Emotions Behind Conflict. Couples must be able to recognize, share and address the emotional content behind conflict. Repeated conflict is never about the facts, opinions and decisions; it is about the emotions and fears behind the argument. If a couple cannot deal with those emotions directly, then the emotions will stay in charge and the conflict will continue.

Most people think the method to resolve conflict is to set aside the emotions and focus on the facts with a calm exchange of ideas. This works great when emotions are not involved (like at work) but will escalate into contention and end in pain when feelings are involved.

The conflicts that destroy marriage are most often rooted in deep fears and emotions from our childhood. Basically, we all have insecurities and fears about how we bond with others (i.e., "attachment fears"). Sometimes it presents as difficulty trusting others, and sometimes we struggle to see ourselves as lovable. Rejection, abandonment, being dismissed or exploited are all common attachment fears, but there are many more. Sooner or later spouses will trigger these attachment fears in the other. This starts a chain reaction as the way each person copes with their pain, and fear becomes the trigger of the other person's fear.

Usually, you can't break the cycle without outside help, but if you enter the marriage with a good understanding of not only your attachment fears and coping mechanisms but also your spouse's then you can probably avoid an emotional lock down.

How important are these three things? I would say don't get married until these are settled. If you can't make the changes needed BEFORE you get married, then there is no reason to think you will change after you tie the knot. However, if you hammer these out beforehand, you will deepen your connection and prove that you are already doing all three.