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## Is Marriage Still Relevant?

Marriage is blood, sweat and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. A stable marriage is an achievement that will demand the very best from you, so I'm tired of hearing sentimental talks on marriage. While marriage is many things, it is not magical. It is glorious but hard. It is a burning joy and strength, but I do not know of a single marriage that could be described as a fairy tale come true.

More people are becoming cynical about marriage. For many, the whole idea just sounds too restricting and difficult. Is marriage really worth it? Roughly 50% end in divorce, which can be heart-wrenching to go through. So we are witnessing a wariness and pessimism about marriage. Many young adults believe their chances of having a good marriage is unlikely, and, even if a marriage is stable, they then fear the worst - that it will become sexually boring.

It's as if our options are either being single and lonely or married and bored.

Neither of these sound appetizing so a lot of people aim for something in the middle, halfway between marriage and mere sexual encounters - cohabitation with a sexual partner. This is a relatively modern idea, while in the early nineteenth century virtually no one lived together before getting married, today, practically everyone lives together before getting married (that is, if they do get married).

Driving this modern practice (cohabitation with a sexual partner) is the assumption that most marriages are unhappy, therefore, many argue that living together before marriage improves your odds of making a good marriage choice. It helps you discover whether you are compatible, whether the "chemistry" is strong enough before you take the leap. While on the surface that would seem sensible, the statistics, however, declare that *"a substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage."*

Most people today see cohabitation as a wise precaution against future divorce. But the data tells another story. A study conducted by Michael Rosenfeld and Katharina Roesler, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, shows with findings held across decades of data that there remains a clear link between premarital cohabitation and increased odds of divorce. Additionally, other studies show that cohabitation actually decreases the likelihood that you will marry in the first place. That "decreasing the likelihood of marriage" refers to the hotly coined "millennial divorce," - the breakup of unmarried cohabitating couples. According to data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Millennials have moved in together at higher rates, but are getting married at lower rates. So the problem is that if you do want to get married (and stay married) after cohabiting, you're less likely to achieve that future. The psychologist Jordan Peterson noted that *"Cohabitation without the promise of permanent commitment, socially announced, ceremonially established, seriously considered, does not produce more robust marriages. And there is nothing good about that -"*

*particularly for children, who do much worse in single-parent (generally male-absent) families.”*

Also, the assumption grounding this practice is completely false. According to research conducted at the *Department of Family and Consumer Studies* at the university of Utah, over 60% of married people claim to be “very happy” in their marriages. And according to other longitudinal studies, two-thirds of those unhappy marriages will become happy within five years if they stay married. Hence why sociologist Linda J. Waite from the University of Chicago stated that *“the benefits of divorce have been oversold.”* She’s right. In fact, the great preponderance of research evidence over the last two decades reveals that people who are married consistently show much higher degrees of satisfaction with their lives than those who are single, divorced, or just living with a partner.

The overwhelming verdict is that, in general, being married is an enormous enhancement to our wellbeing, as pointed out in a report from the University of Virginia’s National Marriage Project: explaining how the negative view of marriage is *“contrary to the available empirical evidence, which consistently indicates the substantial personal as well as social benefits of being married compared to staying single or just living with someone.”*

## **Settling for less**

Despite this, according to the findings of a *Pew Research Center Survey*, roughly 40% of people believe marriage is becoming obsolete. This is radical. There has never been a century that we know of in which marriage was not central to life, yet while the number of married people has decreased in the western world, the percentage of people who desire to be married has not diminished at all. We feel a profound longing for life partnerships, which marriage is an expression of. There is an inevitable yearning in our nature for the completion that another might provide. Many of us feel incomplete and that only a proper romantic union will provide it. We all innately know that we are made to love and be loved. So what is happening? People are settling for the concept of cohabitation with a sexual partner, and yet there is still a deep power in marriage which we still long for or even envy.

My answer is that cohabitation alone does not satisfy the heart’s yearning for love because it is the nature of love to bind itself, and there is nothing “biding” with mere cohabitation. The “boyfriend” “girlfriend” status (whatever that means to most) really isn’t binding at all; if you find a better option you can hop out at any moment with relatively few complications. This makes people uneasy because love by definition wants to last, it desires permanence, and to last it requires something of a guarantee, a promise, a vow. This is part of the power of marriage which we crave, a sense of security that the other isn’t just going to leave whenever they feel “off” or when you underperform. Marriage is a covenant, and this concept of a “covenant” provides more security and character in a relationship than anything else. This is one of the major differences between marriage and cohabitation.

*If you like someone you seek cohabitation. If you really love them you seek marriage* – I know this is a bold claim, but it is the natural outflow of love to lead to promise. If a relationship has dragged on for years with no signs of deepening or progressing toward marriage, it may be that one person has found a level of relationship (such as cohabitation) short of marriage, in which he or she is receiving all that is wanted and desired and feels no need to take it to the final stage of accountable commitment.

A significant study by the National Marriage Project concludes that *“cohabitation gives men regular access to the domestic and sexual ministrations of a girlfriend while allowing them... to lead a more independent life”* and keep an eye out *“for a better partner.”* Cohabitation gives some of the surface benefits of marriage without being confined to one person for the rest of your life so that if your

sexual passions, desires or drives change from that person, you have an easier route out. No house, no mortgage. It keeps your options open. So when someone is tempted to conclude, *“Well, how about we live together, instead of getting married? We will try each other out. I think that’s more sensible.”* What that would seem to mean, when you invite someone to live with you, instead of committing yourself to each other, is that, *“well at the moment I like you and I presume you like me, so let’s live together, but let’s not fully commit to each other just in case we’d like to swap each other out for a better option at any point if it comes to it.”* And if you do not think that is what mere cohabitation means, then please formulate something more plausible.

## **More liking than loving**

So why would someone not want to make this final step of commitment in marriage? I would suggest that it is because they don’t yet love the person enough to sacrifice their options for them; or maybe they fear the responsibility that love demands. There is a difference between just *liking* someone and *loving* someone, *especially loving someone more than yourself.*

Now it is vital that we have a sufficient resource and understanding of the definition of love, otherwise love is nothing more than a fragile feeling. Ideally we like those we love, and it is natural to end up like this, but we can still like someone without really loving them.

To “like” anything means to take some sort of pleasure in it, and so we must begin with pleasure. Pleasure is the fulfilment of our natural desires but as soon as our need is fulfilled, the pleasure disappears. Whether that be a refreshing drink after a hot day, or even sexual enjoyment, pleasure only lasts as long as we feel a need is being fulfilled. As soon as pleasure occurs, it almost immediately dies on us. Now it’s not unusual to view people in the same way: when you see a lustful man standing in a club, you might say he “wants a woman”, but strictly speaking, a woman is precisely what he doesn’t want. He wants pleasure which is only possible with the woman. How much he cares about her will be revealed by his attitude to her after he gets sexual enjoyment. He doesn’t love her, he loves himself and so will use her to fulfil his desire. Likewise, a woman desperate for the intimate feelings associated with a relationship may say she loves her boyfriend because she is emotionally fulfilled and excited, but if, or should I say, *when* the emotions fade, which at times will happen, will she still be committed to him? Or did she only stick around while he made her happy and emotionally charged up? No one keeps the carton after they have smoked the cigarettes. It is the nature of pleasure to show us the object in relation to our *momentary need*, whether that be social, sexual, emotional or whatever else.

Beyond mere pleasure alone, to love someone really is to want them. To love someone is to reach a level deeper than just emotions, feelings and pleasures. In some mysterious but quite indisputable fashion, the lover desires the beloved herself, not the pleasure or feelings she can give. He sees her as an admirable thing in herself, far more important than the lover’s apparent need. It is to desire someone, as distinct from desiring any pleasure, emotion, or service that person can provide.

In time, real authentic love goes beyond questions like: *“do you like me? Do you act like me? Do you agree with me? Do you make me happy?”* Love never spoke that way. It is like loving your children only if they’re good, your wife while she keeps her looks, or your husband so long as he’s successful. Real love *gives*, it longs to serve, or even to suffer for. Instead of being needy, calculating what affection or interest you are getting out of a relationship, you ponder on what you can give to the other person’s life. Love wants to give her happiness, comfort and protection. If you go into a relationship with this truer view of love then your aim is to spend yourself and use yourself for the happiness of the other, because your greatest joy is that person’s joy. You go into a relationship primarily to cherish the other, to care for them, develop and grow them, and bring them joy and

pleasure. This love is gift-based, therefore your affection is unconditional: you give it regardless of whether your loved one is meeting your needs. And it's radically vulnerable: you spend everything, hold nothing back but give it all away. Now, if we don't understand the necessity of sacrifice, *a love that exceeds ourselves*, all we will do is transfer a pathetic self-centred affection camouflaged as love.

Now without love, sexual desire becomes about ourselves rather than the other person, regardless of how passionate or emotional we may feel. Pleasure, whether sexual, emotional or in whatever context, should be seen as a wonderful by-product, but not a primary source of security for a relationship. *Love is a commitment before it is a delight and the delight is an expression of that commitment, not an end in itself.*

## **A reward that demands**

Now if we look at relationships today, in the West, romance and lust have become the sum and substance of it all. In the East, however, devotion, commitment and role relations are emphasised in the culture. Somehow these two emphases must be incorporated as without romance a relationship is dull; without will and commitment a relationship loses its weight. Often the authenticity of a relationship is tested in the ability of partners to commit to their initial love. They're forced to meet a test of character - here the Christian faith presents the institution of marriage - a covenant in which two people join in a faithful, lifelong commitment. It was instituted by God joining two people for life. Marriage is the closest, most intimate human relationship we can experience right now, and God uses it to mirror the intimate relationship He wants to have with his people.

The reality of this kind of marriage is that now you must commit to what you vowed beyond what you may prefer moment by moment. C.S. Lewis once said: *"We often mistake love with just emotions, look at all you romantic films and novels, it's just about you feeling this great emotional experience, and it's beautiful, it's a good thing, but if this is the whole thing, then the promise of marriage can add nothing, and if it adds nothing then should it be made?"*

Now when you kickstart a relationship with someone you like, all you know is that you have feelings for them. And isn't that enough? When you are intimate with them, it feels like a trip to heaven. When you see them after an extended absence, you actually feel "the tingles." You like everything about them. You like the way they look, the way they talk, the way they present themselves. You're captivated by the look in their eyes. He or she seems perfect to you, and you can't imagine yourself with anyone else. It doesn't even seem like you need to work on your relationship at all, it's easy. With all these thoughts and feelings, surely you'll be happy for the rest of your lives?

Yet something changes. Over time their flaws and imperfections start to become increasingly problematic. What once was small now looms large. The "butterfly" stage of a relationship is great, but it tends to last only a couple of years if you're lucky. Then you get used to that person, you see them inside out and you're not so impressed. You're bored. You realise your value systems and goals are contradictory. Your interests and core beliefs are miles apart. The euphoric feelings fade, and you never anticipated this. You thought the positive perceptions and feelings you had for each other would remain for a lifetime. But they haven't. So what do you do now? Leave? Break up?

If you thought love is *just* a feeling, why? Don't get me wrong, I am not against feelings - they're great. But if the stability of the relationship is based on *your* happiness and the emotions *you* feel, then ultimately the relationship is about *servicing you*, and they are just a way to get what you want. You may "like" your partner, but make no mistake about it, unless you learn to put others before yourself, then it is not love. It is just an illusion of love.

While you make a marriage promise when and because you are emotionally “in love”, you commit to being true to your partner as long as you live, even if you cease to feel an emotional connection. A promise must be about things you can do, about actions, as no-one can promise to go on feeling a certain way. Human life teaches all too well that these feelings and emotions of love, as great and as good as they are, helping us to feel excited and compassionate, unfortunately tend to fluctuate. Throughout the emotional highs and the lows even when you feel connected or otherwise, there can remain a deep unity maintained by the will and commitment of your word in the faithfulness and foundation of a marriage vow. Two people can therefore stay in love even in moments when they don't like each other, the same way you love your family or kids even when you sometimes can't stand them. A couple can maintain this love even though each person could easily, if they allowed themselves to, fill themselves with emotions for someone else.

To clarify, what I am saying is that emotions and feelings should be seen as *servants* to a relationship, and not treated as the *leading force* for it. Nowadays we get the twisted idea that if you have married the right person the feelings become the foundation of it. As a result, when we find we no longer feel it, we think this proves we have made a mistake and are entitled to a change, not realising that when we have changed to the next person the glamorous feeling will presently go out of the new love just as it went out of the old.

To love your partner you must give yourself to them in a selfless manner, not hold yourself back from them. You must look for their good even if that means your inconvenience, you must focus on giving pleasure before getting it. When you become less self-focused, you often discover new feelings and emotions which are longer lasting for each other. *The reward of selfless love is more love.* Marriage is not just a “piece of paper” or a time when you get nice photos; it's a devotion to abandon your personal autonomy to gain a joint autonomy with the one you love because love is selfless, and if love is selfless, it does not look to undo but constantly looks to build and join. This establishes that marriage is for life - “till death do us part” we say.

This all sounds intense doesn't it? And it is! Marriage isn't meant to be easy, and why would you think it should be? Nothing great ever is. Even in the most successful romantic partnership there is hard work. There are stresses and strains. So don't be deceived by the flutter of the heart. Love is a commitment that will be tested in the most vulnerable areas, a commitment that will force you to make some very difficult choices. It is a commitment that demands that you deal with your lust, your greed, your pride, your power, your desire to control, your temper, your patience, and every area of temptation that the Bible so clearly talks about. It demands the quality of commitment that Jesus demonstrates in his relationship to us, that “*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Love demands the best from you, it demands you to grow up and develop in character. So if you're in a relationship and you have any courage, any long-term vision and ability to vow and adopt responsibility, if you have any maturity - then you will seek marriage and begin to transform the two of you into one decent person.

## **The great marriage**

But there is a greater context to marriage. Echoed throughout the Bible are the words, “*You shall be my people, and I will be your God.*” This is the language of belonging in God's covenant love. He is claiming to be the covenant-making God, who has promised to make a people for Himself and to give Himself to them, like a husband gives himself to his bride. So for Christians, marriage has a purpose for and benefit to the husband and wife, but it also has the wider purpose and public benefit of being a shadow of what God is offering to all people in Jesus. God has made us sexual beings and gives us this instinct towards lifelong partnership, precisely to point us to the greater reality of his covenant love for us in Christ. God promises to bring us into a new covenant with him, made possible through

the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Until this covenant comes to fruition, we would be wise not to mistake marriage and romantic fulfilment for the reality it is designed to point us to. It is a sign of something greater, but we should not mistake it for the reality itself. This is not intended to belittle marriage, but actually to show where its ultimate glory lies.

So is marriage relevant? Yes, marriage is relevant because love desires trust, trust requires commitment and commitment requires a covenant. God has made us to love and be loved by Himself and in marriage we can get a glimpse of the greatest relationship of all.