

HABIT EIGHT

Grow in Character as Your Marriage Grows

“... do to others as you would have them do unto you.”

Matthew 7:12

Most of this book deals with individual habits — how you order your own life so you grow to your maximum potential. The next three habits, however, deal with family relationships. Using these relationships for personal growth, instead of allowing them to deplete our resources, can make a wonderful addition. Family relationships are God’s chief means for molding us into Christ-likeness. In them, we must sacrifice — die to ourselves — for it to work. Here we examine personal growth in marriage. Then, in the next two chapters, we will discover that while helping our children develop, we also develop enormously.

Would you like to have such a good marriage that others use your marriage as a model for their own? If you apply what you read here, you can have just that. Why would anyone want to live with less than the best — two highly effective Christians living and growing together?

God wills healthy and affirming marriages. His Word gives instructions about how to build them. We can allow our marriages to be a workshop for spiritual character development and the marriage partnership — a ministry team. Good marriages are built; they don’t just happen. Maintenance and

improvement are continual, lifelong projects. My wife, Char, and I have learned to “turn to” instead of “turn against” each other. Marriage is a diamond with many facets worth polishing. In the following pages, you will read some of what we have learned in our many happy years of growth together since April 1969.

Marriage and Cultural Issues

Consider marriages in Confucian family systems. Char and I served 18 years in Asia. We lived with the subtle remnants of Asian family traditions in which deceased ancestors are perceived to remain active in the daily lives of living descendants. They are believed to be able to bring good fortune or punishment to the living. This is the rationale for veneration of ancestors. Ancestor worship and the accompanying emphasis on respect for parents produces a vertical family structure. Sons serve their fathers. Parents choose the marriage partners of their children. Wives do not change their names when they get married. They remain outsiders in their husbands’ families.

In such a patriarchal and vertically oriented family system, daughters-in-law serve mothers-in-law. Most unfortunately, love for one’s wife is considered an insult to one’s parents. Men take a wife to produce descendants.

Marriage is a means to both please the ancestors and produce future worshippers. Children serve their parents to gain their favor with the hope of avoiding future catastrophes after Mom and Dad are “gone” (but not gone in this worldview). In this environment, wives resent being used and live for the day they can use their own daughters-in-law. As an understandable and unfortunate result, romance is often lacking in marriages but flourishes outside of them!

In 1996, we returned to the United States where marriage is under another type of attack. Young adults often feel that romance is the only basis for marriage. When they no longer feel romantic, they think they have fallen out of love. American culture has lost sight of the fact that to love or not to love is an act of the will and that marriage is a contract for a lifetime.

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Breaking that sacred covenant has become so much the cultural norm that even believers are breaking it. The divorce rate for Christians is no lower than that of the non-Christian sector. In the northeastern states, where the percentage of born-again believers is lower, the divorce rate is the lowest. In the Bible Belt and south where the percentage of born-again believers is higher, the divorce rate is the highest!

This chapter is not an anti-divorce tirade. We will think more deeply than that and illustrate how we can grow as our marriages grow. If we are fine-tuning our character in our marriages, we experience one of the strongest developmental processes woven into human social fabric. Over time, we change and change and change, and so does the situation. No one can know what the spouse or the situation will become with time. But contracts remain in force. Our romantic dreams of marriage may have become a mirage. Our plan for a sweet dessert may have become a dry and parched desert. But if we get the emphasis right, mirages can become marriages again, and deserts can become desserts again. It is all a matter of correct emphasis!

Asian marriages are pressured by vertical family problems while American marriages are entered too lightly and broken too often. The Bible provides many healthy instructions for personal character development, equal partnerships, and useful service to God through our marriages. Furthermore, as a bonus, we get to really enjoy romance, too! According to surveys, Christians have the highest rate of enjoyment of physical intimacies. Non-Christians talk more about it, but Christians enjoy physical intimacy more with no regrets, guilt, or misgivings. Char and I, like hundreds of others, have learned how to be good friends in marriage and enjoy a better party than anything Hollywood has to offer. Like other mature Christians and happily married partners, we too joke, romp, play, talk, listen, rake leaves, and wash dishes like young people in love. You can, too!

The Reciprocity Principle

To reciprocate means to pay back in kind. Verbal exchanges continually occur between married partners. They can be good or bad. Satan wants to undermine our joy by sowing seeds of discord in marriages. He tries to drive wedges between husbands and wives, to divide and conquer, to destroy the strength they could gain from unity and purpose in the marriage. Satan seeks to begin negative reciprocal cycles. God wants to help us maintain

positive ones. Behavior in any close relationship is much affected by the principle of reciprocity. You have heard spouses exchange pleasant and affirming words: “That looks nice.” “Thanks, you look good to me, too.” We have also heard negative cycles: “That was a klutzy move.” “Well, you were in my way, jerk.” Humans are naturally inclined to return good for good or bad for bad, and both the size and speed of the exchanges can be increased or decreased. The goal is to slow down, reduce the size, or even abort the negative cycles, and, at the same time, start and increase the speed and size of the positive cycles.

Scripture says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). If you don’t like the treatment you are receiving, review the treatment you are giving! It is not likely that a partner will consistently return bad for good. If you are not *receiving* courteous respect, it may be because you are not *giving* courteous respect. God’s rules are good for us. The above verse could say: “It is good for you to do to others as you would have them do to you.” Plant seeds of courtesy, honesty, affirmation, and care. You will benefit by reaping the blessing of courtesy, honesty, affirmation, and care. Be a good spouse, and you will find you have a good spouse. Keep the positive reciprocal cycles going in your marriage.

If you are not yet married, evaluate the relationship with the person you are dating. Does that person possess the potential for partnering in a mutually affirming reciprocal relationship? A good married life, including good physical experiences, is built on this kind of maturity. When I come home from work, I like to announce my arrival as I come in the garage door. I walk down the hall by singing out something like, “Hey, hey, Baby, I want to know if you’ll be my girl.” This sets a good tone for the entire supper hour and evening because Char responds in kind.

The Role Model Principle

Marriage roles for the most part are unconsciously learned by long-term observation. My dad’s greatest gift to me was to treat Mom like a queen. He was always saying something good or kind to or about her. He never allowed any of his children to be critical of her. Some of us, sadly, must overcome the disadvantage of poor models. After all, we did not choose our parents. But be of good cheer; there is a solution to the role model problem! We are to honor our parents. However, if they