

# Habits of Unhealthy Marriages

## *Making Love Last a Lifetime:*

Ephesians 4:25-32

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My 88-years-old mother, a former preacher herself, asked, “What are you preaching about this Sunday?” When she heard the title, she asked, “How is it relevant to singles and seniors?” I was ready to answer because I’ve asked that question as I’ve prepared this series. This series and message are relevant because relationships are vital to our mission. You were born into relationships and are called into them. Marriage principles are relationship principles. They are transferable principles. They work in different situations and with different people. When we coach married couples, we are also coaching families, athletic teams, business associates, friends, and so on.

Last week, I said that I’ve never seen a marriage break up over a problem. All marriages and all relationships with any depth have problems... because people have shortcomings. Problems don’t break us up. What happens to our hearts breaks us up. That is true of marriages, families, friendships and businesses. Each of us overlooks shortcomings in our relationships. All of us have bad habits, and they annoy people. Having said that, some habits are so destructive, a heart, nor a life, can long endure it. Let’s then look at five habits of death.

The first is **dishonor**. We all are creations of God. By virtue of that, we deserve honor. Dishonor violates our nature. In fact, we found in surveys that admiration and appreciation are critical needs of spouses. To show contempt, to disrespect, to despise, to criticize and constantly tear down, cripples spouses. Unfortunately, this is all too common. Whether it is sarcastic humor that degrades or whether it is freely or openly speaking about shortcomings, hearts

become quickly crippled. I'm not saying that we're not to bring up shortcomings; but what tact do you take, what care do you show, and what purpose do you advance in doing so? Sometimes, spouses live into what we say about them. A husband, who is constantly told that he is a failure, will eventually live like one. Conversely, husbands and wives whose mates speak highly of them, who receive five times more affirmation than criticism (as we discussed last week), eventually become worthy of that praise. The Bible teaches:

***Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.*** (Romans 12:10, NLT)

What we speak is powerful. We think with words; they form the building blocks of our understanding. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote that though the tongue is tiny, it's like a ship's rudder that with a turn here or there determines our course and future. The Scriptures say:

***Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.***  
(Ephesians 4:29, NLT)

Your mate doesn't need words of judgment. Mates need to know what they are doing right and what positive thing you see them becoming.

Related to the notion of dishonor is verbal and physical abuse. Some of you may struggle with anger control that results in outbursts that demean, threaten or even physically injure your mate or children. If this is true, be certain that the outbursts do injure whether it is physical or not. You may feel great sorrow and remorse, but that won't cure you. Your outburst broke a fence down within you, and you will injure again with another emotional outburst, regardless of your oaths and promises. At this point, you are not growing a marriage. You are perpetuating a nightmare, even if there are long positive interludes between the outbursts. You need help, right away. Call me. I can get you the help you need.

A second deadly habit is **deceit**. Dishonesty or lying kills trust and results in emotional separation. Even the small lies intended to spare another's feelings, "Yah, I like the hairdo," erodes your mate's trust in your truthfulness. If you lie about small things, how can you be trusted in the big things? You won't be trusted. A lie is a betrayal of your identity as a child of God. Satan is the father of lies, not God. In Colossians 3, the Bible teaches us to not lie because we are being renewed by God's Spirit to reflect God to the world. Lies betray God; they betray yourself and they betray your mate. No heart or relationship can long withstand them.

A third habit is **debt**. Few things have so much power to destroy as money. I called the habit debt, but it is better to call it *poorly handling money*. This may mean overspending that causes stress and conflict, but it may be just overemphasizing money. I've seen marriages torn apart by putting too much emphasis on money. It becomes the focus of life; and everything, including time, relationships and spiritual obedience, is mortgaged for the acquisition and use of money. Jesus taught that where our treasure is there will also be our hearts. Possessions possess. A heart possessed by money is not free to love. Instead, it uses people. We teach on financial management and giving at Bethany, and they do free hearts and build relationships.

**Drugs** are a fourth habit that slowly and painfully destroys marriages. Most people who abuse drugs, especially the drug called alcohol, don't think they have a problem. People who drink alcohol for its euphoric or relaxing effect are abusers. They are not simply enjoying the fruit of the vine and giving thanks to the Creator as modeled in Scriptures. Instead, they are seeking life from a dangerous source. And that source becomes more and more important to them. It drives their schedule and commands their attention. Some 53 percent of men and women in America identify at least one close relative as having a drinking problem. Do you know why they identify them as having a problem? Listen to Solomon's words.

***Wine produces mockers; liquor leads to brawls. Whoever is led astray by drink cannot be wise.*** (Proverbs 20:1, NLT)

There is a turning point when drink leads us. When it leads us, we don't have perspective.

Someone else's input is required. If your spouse is concerned about your drinking, listen. They see something leading you away. Your spouse's words may save your life if you listen.

The fifth devastating habit is **infidelity**. Every portion of the Bible – the Law, the Prophets, the Writings, the Gospels and Epistles – unanimously condemn extra-marital affairs. Nothing is more explosive in a family or leaves a wider debris field. That debris field includes drug use, illnesses, divorce, devastated children, even murder. One woman learning of her husband's infidelity fell to the floor, curled up into the fetal position and just began to sob. One can be emotionally unfaithful to the spouse without physically violating the covenant, and the effects are still devastating. In a couple weeks, we'll look into this more and into healing from it.

As you see, these problems cannot be overlooked. We must deal with them; but that is not all. There are two principles and one habit that bring so much healing that they must be implemented even when you are concentrating on one of these problems. Jesus gave us two life-giving principles that must dominate our behavior. Wherever these two principles are practiced, God's Spirit is healing and building people. You know them already. One you learned early in life. It is called the Golden Rule:

***Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.*** (Matthew 7:12, NLT)

When you treat people like you want you want to be treated, when you treat your spouse like you want to be treated, they grow in honor and blessing. Listen like you want to be listened to, serve like you'd like to be served, speak like you'd like to be spoken to.

The second key relationship principle that Jesus taught is the Law of Love.

***You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.***  
(Matthew 22:37-40, NLT)

Simply put, when you love and trust God, and embrace his call to love your neighbor as you love yourself, God, who created, now recreates. Since we were made in love, love rebuilds lives.

Out of that love comes a very healthy habit for marriages. It is called forgiveness. It is a grace from God that treats people generously and a mercy that refuses to hold their shortcomings against them. There is a general grace and a specific grace. The general grace builds people because it focuses on what people possess that can be built on. God accepts us as we are, and then he goes to work with us. That's grace that accepts us and comes near. Peter wrote, ***“Love covers over a multitude of sins”*** (1 Peter 4:8). That is grace that accepts. However, God's grace goes further. It restores. Specific grace deals with shortcomings for the purpose of restoration. This is where we confront an issue with forgiveness. Our point is not to exact a debt. That would not be forgiveness. It is to restore a person. Six words are critical in this: “I am wrong” and “I forgive you.” Those words must become part of our everyday vocabulary. They must become meaningful and true of us. They must be our practice with one another. “I am wrong, forgive me.” “I forgive you.” To be sure there may need to be restitution and a thorough hearing about the consequences of our acts, but those six critical words are the tools of rebuilding our marriages, families and community.

In a marriage and in other relationships, we need to overlook some shortcomings and identify and bless the gifts. Yet, some problems are unfolding disasters. They need to be addressed. If we do so with love, honor, honesty, grace, confession and forgiveness, then be assured that the breath of God is birthing new life and health. What a future will unfold!

