

## Help for Troubled Marriages

*(Recently, Jeff Himmel of the Plant City, Florida congregation sent the following email to a number of gospel preachers. His questions speak for themselves. I have included Kent Heaton's and my own response to him. prb)*

"Hello, brothers. I'm writing to get your insight on something (as if you have nothing else to do this week). In the past few years I've seen or heard of several repeats of a troublesome scenario. A young lady and a young man (both Christians) date each other, fall in love, and have a seemingly healthy relationship. Eventually they get married. Then within just a few weeks the wife begins to confide in others that, since the wedding, her husband has become domineering, controlling, unreasonable, and perhaps even abusive (verbally, emotionally, and/or physically). I've seen at least one marriage be quickly destroyed in this way."

"Have you seen this kind of thing happen, and does it seem to be happening more frequently, or is it just me? What factors are causing it? What can preachers, teachers, families, and congregations do (that they aren't doing already) to prevent it? Thanks in advance for your thoughts." (Jeff Himmel, Plant City Church of Christ)

### Kent Heaton's Reply

I think we are reaping the children of a culture that has done everything for their children but prepare them for the real world. There is a tendency within families to shower children with everything and require little out of them. Often I am afraid many young people go into life expecting for everyone to give them what they want to make them happy. Everritt and I were talking just the other day about a young couple that faced challenges in their marriage because the young man has been doted over by his mother to the point that he wants to be pampered by his new wife. This may be the result of the "Spoiled Generation" that knows little of having to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps and work for a living. With all this technology, most young people know nothing more than sitting around with their faces glued to computer screens or smart phones. Little or no ambition and quite frankly a sense of laziness that demands the world owes them happiness. This creates an environment with newlywed couples where they no longer have mom and dad doing everything for them, and they now expect the same from their new spouse. Fights happen because they have to pick up after themselves or be the maid for the other spouse. Life is fun when they are dating because they are on a love high, but when reality settles in they are mad because they have to go to work every morning or make up their own beds or wash their own dishes.

I am not sure the reasons for this can be blamed on the church. Another cultural development that is becoming more evident is the mindset that parents have that if their child is going to know anything about God, it is up to the church to teach them. Recently a lady was upset about some things that happened at church and she came short of blaming the church – when in fact little is being done in the home to train the children and teach the children the principles of God. The most we can have the children in a "church setting" is less than four hours a week – yet parents believe the total summation of their family's spirituality rest upon those few hours. In short, the home is falling apart with too much stuff, too much busy, too much entertainment, too much technology – just too much of everything. We really do live in the ME! ME! ME! society that wants everything to be handed to them on a silver platter. It seems too simplistic and I may be over stating the facts or problems. I agree with you though. More and more of these young people entering marriage are having serious EGO problems that develop into marriage unhappiness.

Maybe a last observation is in part the work the church needs to be doing more of: teaching the principles of Philippians 2:1-11. The great lesson there is that as people of God it is

not about me – it is about the other person and the cause of Christ. As preachers we may need to work more in trying to get the brethren to see the spirit of servitude. Teaching married couples to learn feet washing (John 13) may help. One thought is that we make it a mandatory practice that before someone can be married they must go through an intense 12 week course. They would probably go find someone else to marry them.

### **Paul R. Blake's Follow-Up**

Your analysis is excellent. The solution is obvious. Fixing a marriage is difficult; preventing a bad marriage is less so. Preventative teaching is critical. I can offer some tools to use to that end.

1) Begin in the junior high class (ages 11-14) with teaching on dating and marriage. Include in it specific instruction regarding how a man treats a woman and vice versa. Put emphasis on the permanence of marriage and on avoiding the sins of abuse, pornography, rampant materialism and debt, and other contemporary issues that afflict so many marriages today. Repeat it in greater depth in the high school class.

2) Preach on those subjects. Do not be afraid to address each of those matters in sermons. Sunday evening would perhaps be better as that service seems to be a good venue for deeper matters. Do not be overly graphic, but also do not be squeamish. Far too many preachers spent countless sermons on divorce and remarriage when more sermons on making good marriages would prevent an number of those divorces from happening.

3) Before marrying a couple, sit down with them and talk about these things and warn the man that the eldership has a zero tolerance policy for spousal abuse. Tell the woman that if this happens, the elders will be available to help her if her husband abuses her and will not hesitate to contact the law on her behalf.

4) Admonish men to seek professional counseling when their wives report they are looking at internet porn, and remove them from public leadership for a period of time, and interview them from time to time to monitor their progress. Pornography addiction is powerful with a high recidivism rate; it is easy for them to fall back into it. That's where a counselor can give them the practices they need to keep their focus. Inform the men the elders will do the same thing if they are abusing their wives or children. These are subjects the majority of congregations are too fearful to address clearly. Be upfront and direct in teaching and warning, and you will prevent some of it from happening. Do not hesitate to report men who abuse their wives or children to the law. Christians do not shield criminal activity under the misused blanket of 1Corinthians 6:1-8.

5) Do not be afraid to recommend marriage counseling. There are many faith-based or at least faith respecting counseling organizations available in most communities. They are not permitted to proselyze; they simply supplement the individual's Bible based convictions with successful counseling techniques. Consider this an adjunct to the teaching they receive at home and in Bible classes. Too many congregations take a head in the sand approach to mental and emotional health issues. Naïve brethren who tell persons suffering from severe depression or sexual addiction to "just get over it" are as ignorant as if they had told a diabetic to stop taking insulin and "just get over it."

6) Review the local church's teaching program on interaction in marriage. If it is the same shallow class material that keeps being recycled because brethren are too lazy or fearful to study deeper, change it! Most published studies in the past only consider intact nuclear homes. There is very little help for homes that have been sorely impacted and broken up by sin, untimely death, long term illness, etc. The solution in the past has often been for misguided men to order the abused woman back into the home of the abuser without close monitoring.

7) Arrange for some spiritually mature sisters to arrange for support, help, and encouragement from a number of women in the local church for the young bride. If she can

regularly talk with peers with strong faith, it will sustain and edify her while she works through the troubles in her marriage.