

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

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Love and Marriage:

50 Years of
Lessons

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Karen and I entered the grand adventure of marriage in 1969. We were young and in love. Given the demands of long hours in ministry and the reality of low pay, we knew we would never make a lot of money. At that time, we thought it was going to be hard, perhaps impossible, for us to ever purchase a house. Later we were able to scrimp and save and eventually buy a house, but “making a home” proved to be a far more challenging task.

We could not wait to start our family—and we didn’t! As we awaited the arrival of our first child, I lived in a Never-Neverland, with dreams and expectations of a little child emerging from Karen’s womb, smiling and cooing, “I love you Mommy and Daddy.” As Karen and I anticipated our first little bundle of joy, I did not dwell on

the grim reality that infants stink up the apartment or house, they cause parents to lose sleep and become grumpy, and then as children “mature” they have temper tantrums, scream and rebel.

We loved our daughter and our son before they were born, but like all parents, we were not prepared for the long hours and low pay involved in being a loving parent. Later, as exasperated parents of teens often say, there are those dog days of parenting when parents become so fed up with their teenagers they want to send them back.

It’s a good thing, in a way, that parents wanting to have children are blinded to the realities they will face, because if young married couples had any idea about how much kids would *smell and rebel*, the human race would have ended long ago.

Marriage requires commitment and it is a long slog—today it seems when someone wants an answer, solution or successful outcome, all one needs to do is “Google” it. I know far less now than I once thought I did, but I can tell you 50 years into the adventure of marriage, I do know that one doesn’t Google a successful marriage—nor do they ask Siri or Alexa to produce one out of thin air.

Marriage is one of the hardest things that anyone can ever undertake—but it is a worthy, noble and indeed divine endeavor.

Wedding vows promise to love, cherish, honor and be faithful through sickness and health, through riches and poverty ...to always “be there” and support each other. These vows are virtuous goals and laudable, but they are promises no human can perfectly keep. A more realistic vow would be something like, “in spite of my best intentions, I will screw up and fail on a regular basis and every once in a while, on a good day, I will admit it and ask your forgiveness. But don’t hold your breath expecting me to always say ‘sorry’ when I should.”

Many young people get married thinking that married life will be one eternal, unending, honeymoon of fun and frolicking...one long uninterrupted blissful time of floating in a swimming pool filled with wine and roses. Many starry-

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eyed young people seem to feel they will have a happy marriage if they just **find** the right person, but they are ill-equipped and woefully unprepared to consider a happy marriage involves **being** the right person.

Ideally, the wedding day officially launches the first stage of marriage—a stage that is overwhelmed by idealized notions of romantic love, sex, attraction, sex, infatuation, sex, desire...and...did I mention sex?

Young married couples often think they know all about love but really, they have no idea. They are infatuated. They are often *in love with the idea of being in love*. They are in love with who they want their spouse to be/become.

Though the lyrics of an old song implore a loved one to “*make the world go away*,” marriage doesn’t dissolve or shrink the world—if anything marriage makes the world more complex and challenging. Newly married couples soon discover that marriage is far more than a solitary relationship with another person and that marriage does not make “the world go away.”

Marriage isn’t just about two people. Marriage is like the pebble thrown into the still waters of a pond, causing concentric circles to radiate from the core, until the entire pond is impacted. Marriage affects and impacts lots of people. Marriage is all about others who are supporting the couple and living around this new marriage—parents, children, friends and community.

In marriage, one doesn’t merely marry another person—one gets a “package deal” which is often a “deal” far more than one had bargained for.

Not long after the newlyweds say “I do,” one day they wake up and find themselves on stage, living out a part in a drama they never auditioned for, reading a script it seems someone else wrote.



Report Cards

We are introduced to formal report cards when we start school and we co-exist with those reports for many years of schooling. When we finish school and start work, we discover performance evaluations and annual reviews given to us by our employers. Life is filled with grades and reports and reviews. When we get married, we soon realize that spouses are free to give performance reviews whenever they feel such critiques are needed!

When couples marry, they may have graduated from college or graduate school, but they soon realize marriage means their education is just beginning. Many a young man marries a woman and hopes she will never change, while a young woman marries a man armed with a detailed architectural blueprint about how she will change, fix and repair him. Both wind up disappointed.

The arrival of children means a husband and wife start learning how to be parents. For those married couples who are able and wish to share their lives with children, little do they know when they first bring children into the world, those children will soon be starting to compile a parenting report card they will later present to their parents.

After they have poured their heart, energy and treasure into their children, when their children

become adults, husbands and wives enter the stage of marriage when they learn how to be parents of adult children. All parents eventually have to learn how to “let go” of their children. Parenting is not defined as owning children—it’s really more about leasing or renting them and preparing them to face the world on its own terms.

Couples enter another stage of marriage if and when adult children marry. Then fathers and mothers learn how to be a mother-in-law and a father-in-law. This is another chapter in the book of love and marriage filled with drama and expectations and pitfalls and shortcomings. As parents we receive a grade for this stage as well.

Over 50 years later, I look back. What kind of a grade on my report card do I give myself? There were many failures...many times in which I was far less than what I had hoped to be and give. Is there any advice I have learned...or any wisdom I can pass on to others? I am thankful that as I grew up spiritually, by the grace of God, Jesus enabled me to be more of the kind of husband and father I really wanted to be in the beginning.

I never did win father or husband of the year. I have apologized to both of our children on a number of occasions, but I have also cautioned them that as clearly as they can see my own faults, they are well served

to be aware that their own children (our grandchildren) have razor sharp vision about their own parents' deficits and shortcomings, and they may not be inclined to grade "on the curve."

As I look back on my role in 50 years of marriage, I realize that there are many wounds and hurts Karen and I endured. I have regrets, as indeed most couples who are still married will admit. In the case of the wounds I suffered during these 50 years, I also know that many, if not most of them, were self-inflicted.

I do not consider the fact we have enjoyed and endured 50 years of marriage to be a victory I achieved—it is a celebration of the grace I have been given. I am thankful that Karen, Cherie and Scott stuck with me, and that we all survived.

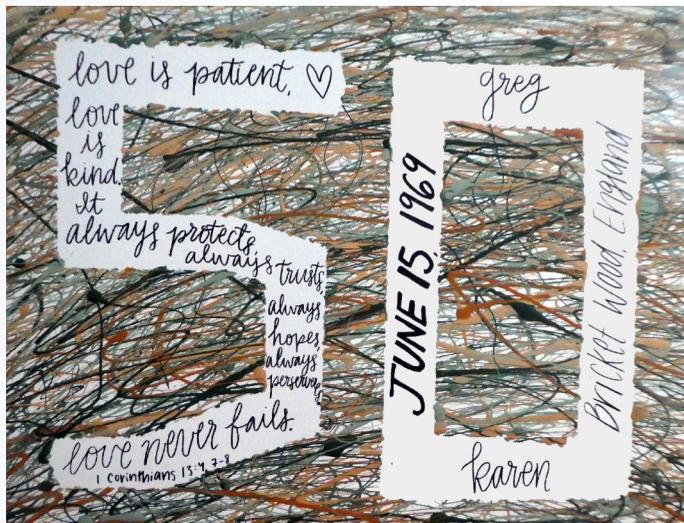
Fighting and "Being Right"

All marriages involve fights, squabbles and disagreements. In a healthy marriage the partners do not do not keep a record of how many fights one wins and how many one loses and how many end in a tie. From the perspective of my gender, many a young husband feels he has won an argument—little does he know it is not over. Nobody wins arguments and fights within marriage.

Studies demonstrate the obvious—newly married couples who insult each other infrequently have

a far greater chance of remaining married. On the other hand, couples who persist in flinging negative, nasty comments at each other are headed for the rocks, unless one or both mature and cooler heads prevail.

- In a healthy marriage forgiveness is lavished on the beloved by the lover.
- Marriage is too intimate and sacred to be all about always being right.
- Marriage grows and is sustained when love, mercy and grace triumph over judgment.
- Marriage is more about wanting to love and receive love than needing to be right.
- Marital love is active and dynamic. In the words of an old song, "the love you take is equal to the love you make."
- Marital love does not keep accurate books, balancing good and bad deeds, carefully measuring assets and liabilities of one's spouse. Love lavishes grace, overlooking the desire for revenge.
- Love that enables a marriage to survive and thrive will not always seek to balance the scales or tilt them in one's favor.
- In a healthy and growing marriage, love is not quick to judge



and condemn. Rather, it soberly realizes that one will be judged by standards one uses to repudiate and criticize.

• Marriage and family grows and matures on the battlefields of selfishness, ego, lust and pride.

Marriage and family do not magically happen as the pixie dust of love sprinkles down on two people who blissfully stroll through carefully manicured and groomed rose gardens. Marriage does involve roses, but as it has often been observed, the beauty of a rose is firmly attached to a stem that features many thorns.

Over 50 years I have learned many things about arguments and disagreements in marriage. I have learned that huffing and puffing can blow the house of marriage down.

On the other hand, serving and sacrificing and swallowing one's pride will build the house of marriage. Marriages become beautiful when they are no longer best described as a duel, but as a duet with both partners striving to sing in harmony.

Marriage teaches how to love, give, support and sacrifice. Marriage teaches us how to serve and respect our beloved. In the words of Paul marriage is about submitting one to another.

Marriage reveals selfishness and stubbornness and dishonesty. When a couple is first married, they celebrate their physical love—they share their bodies and become one





flesh. But sharing one's body does not expose and uncover the soul and spirit that lives in that body, either to oneself and certainly not to one's beloved spouse.

Marriage humbles us because it lays bare who we really are—sadly, *many people who get married refuse to ever admit who they really are and they refuse to admit to anyone that they are ever, ever wrong about anything.*

Our human nature is addicted to a comfortable and pleasing, yet false image of who we really are—a fixation on that false image is a difficult addiction to kick.

In 50 years, marriage teaches many lessons...the lessons are not automatically learned or even listened to by others with whom one might wish to share them, but they are lessons nonetheless.

Lessons Learned

Here's a few of the favorite things I have learned in 50 years of marriage. I thank Karen for helping me learn them:

1) *50 years have taught me* love can take a licking and keep on ticking. Sickness, mistakes and financial hardships can challenge and threaten love.

Love is tough and resilient and it needs to be because there are many enemies that threaten marriage and family. The love of God can heal, redeem and reconcile the mess and brokenness that can and does happen in a marriage.

Love is both a verb and a noun.

Love receives and love gives. Love is the subject and object. Love is a force and dynamic that involves all kinds of feelings, actions and reactions. Love is not a permanent state of excitement or ecstasy.

2) *50 years have taught me* time will never heal all wounds—time might help bad memories fade, but time does not heal.

Acting like wounds don't exist, blaming one's spouse for all the hurts and pains while refusing to accept personal responsibility will never heal wounds. Love alone will heal all wounds. 50 years have taught me that we imperfect humans have a "gift" of always hurting the ones we love, but the gift of divine love will heal those hurts.

3) *50 years have taught me* it's true—all you need is love. All you need is a hand to hold and a heart that understands—all you need is compassion that puts up with you and mercy that forgives you.

All you need is that little fist of a newborn child or grandchild holding your finger, and you're in love for life.

4) *50 years have taught me* words can wound and even destroy. Words are best shared and served soft and tender, because we often have to eat them. Words can and must be forgiven.

Words are cheap. Words are here today and gone tomorrow. Love is expensive, treasured and lasts forever.

5) *50 years have taught me* there are many mortal enemies of love and marriage. Religion can separate and divide a home. Other people can and do, for a variety of reasons, attack the sanctity of marriage and cause enormous grief.

Bitterness, pride and the desire for revenge may be the most toxic of all the enemies of love and marriage. Forgiveness, humility and mercy are true friends and allies of love.

6) *50 years have taught me* idealistic expectations can be a mortal enemy of love—because expectations are idealized notions and they wind up being dashed when the rubber meets the road.

We all have expectations—of ourselves and for our loved ones. Love involves the acceptance of reality when our expectations fail. No husband or wife should ever get tired of seeking forgiveness and assuring their spouse of their love, and no husband or wife should ever tire of saying "sorry" and expressing their love.

7) *50 years have taught me* every couple wants to make it to the top of the mountain, to see their children do well, to enjoy healthy grandchildren, to pay off the mortgage, to retire and enjoy the golden years.

Not everyone will make it to the top of the mountain they are climbing, and that's fine because satisfaction and happiness lie in the journey, not on the top of the mountain. □