

PREDICTORS OF MARITAL SUCCESS: MARKS OF A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

Introduction

- A. God hates divorce (Mal. 2:13-16), yet divorce has rapidly become the norm in our society.
 1. The dismal state of today's families is similar to that of first-century families, when, as Seneca describes, people would "marry to divorce, and then divorce in order to remarry." Sociologists call the current state of affairs (no pun intended) "serial polygamy."
 2. Since the 1960s' "no fault" divorce laws were enacted, *individual self-expression* and *self-esteem* have become more important than *self-control* and *the welfare of others*. For example, a 1997 survey found that 57% believe that divorce is acceptable for reasons including *the fading of romantic feelings* and *communication problems between spouses*.
- B. This change in attitudes has devastated the family and resulted in all types of social ills.
 1. *The average marriage in America now only lasts seven years!*
 2. Recently, it was reported that 30% of all divorces occurred within the first two years of marriage.
- C. Divorce has injured the church as well.
- D. The idea that "Divorce is no big deal; it happens all the time," is dangerous. **IT IS A BIG DEAL. GOD HATES IT AND SO MUST WE. The good news is that IN MOST CASES, DIVORCE CAN BE AVOIDED.**

Summary:

1. **Why God Hates Divorce**
2. **Our Response**
3. **Marks of a Successful Marriage**

I. WHY GOD HATES DIVORCE

- A. Divorce is a violation of **His eternal covenant** (Matt. 19:6). Even when God allows divorce, He still hates it, since no divorce can occur without sin.
- B. **God loves children.** Children need the security of a good marriage to ensure their spiritual and mental health.
 1. Immediately after his strict commandments about Divorce/Remarriage, Jesus makes His famous statement, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." I believe His concern for children is one reason He hates unwarranted divorce (Matt. 19:9, 14).

2. **Research had found that divorce hurts children for their entire lives.**
 - a. One headline reads: "Study Reveals Deep Scars of Divorce: Children Pay Price into Adulthood."
 - b. Barbara Defoe Whitehead concludes, "Children from disrupted families have a harder time achieving intimacy in a relationship, forming a stable marriage, or even holding a steady job. Contrary to popular belief, many children do not bounce back after divorce and remarriage. Difficulties associated with the family breakup often persist 20, 30, even 40 years into adulthood."
- C. **Divorce hurts adults as well.**
 1. Divorcing is very painful. It is like a premature death.
 - a. One in four describes divorce as a "nightmare."
 - b. Only one in seven says it was a relatively painless, smooth transition.
 - c. Divorced physicians, for example, are thirteen times more likely to commit suicide than married physicians.
- D. **Divorce divides.** God's plans always bring peace, not factions (I Cor. 14:33).
- E. **Divorce decreases one's ability to have a successful subsequent marriage.**
 1. Dr. Chapman reports, "Second marriages have a 66% chance of divorce, third marriages a 75% chance, and fourth marriages a 90% chance."
 2. All the emotional baggage of a previous marriage is like a "third partner."

II. OUR RESPONSE

- A. As God's children we desire to *become like Him*. We need to hate divorce and so align our values with His.
- B. Rather than spreading guilt by condemnation, we need to **minister** to the divorced, *love* those who have been harmed by divorce, equip them with God's principles, and *help them rebuild their lives*.
 1. Damaged marriages and families can rebuild and prosper. Jer. 32:27: "Is there anything too hard for Jehovah?" Jer. 32:17: "Ah Lord Jehovah, thou hath made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm, **there is nothing too hard for Jehovah.**" **With God there is HOPE!**
 2. Forgiveness and healing are God's specialties! But God can only heal broken hearts when we give him *all* the pieces.
- C. We must practice **prevention** in our own marriages so that we will avoid divorce and stale and unfulfilling marriages. Neither a failed marriage (in which an unhappy couple stays together) nor a divorce (an ended marriage) gives God glory.
- D. We need to be *wise and diligent* to teach our young people **PREVENTION**.
 1. *It is much easier to build a child than to repair an adult!* **It is much easier to make cautious and prudent choices during courting and the early years of marriage than it is to try to pick up the pieces later.** In this lesson, we will focus on our young people and those who are teaching them.

2. Young people can take proactive measures *during* courtship that will significantly increase their likelihood of creating a successful marriage. Why not be smart and act to *put the odds in your favor*?
3. If your marriage is to succeed, *you must plan to succeed. You cannot afford to go with the flow, doing what most people do. One day you are sure to wake up and find that you are just another statistic* (Matt. 7:13-14).

E. Understand your own situation.

1. Divorce is similar to an automobile accident. As every insurer knows, some accidents are unavoidable. The best drivers can come to grief due to mechanical failures, road hazards, or another driver's error. On the other hand, some drivers are accident-prone, such as young males, those who drink and drive, those who drive souped-up sports cars, and insurance companies charge higher premiums for those who have higher accident rates. Similarly, some are **divorce-prone**. Certain traits, age, family background, education, income, attitude toward marriage, faith in God, etc., affect how high of a "premium" one would pay.
2. The key to success is not the national average, but, given your choices and circumstances, what *your* chances of getting a divorce are.

F. This is our mission. The task demands much in a culture that treats divorce lightly and in which the stigma of divorce is almost totally eroded. Yet take heart! we can succeed with God's help.

1. The divorce rate among the Romans during the first couple of centuries was exponential, and yet this was the time of the church's greatest growth. Christian families set an example that the Romans admired; even the harshest critics would exclaim: "*Behold, what marriages and families they have.*"
2. May it be so with us as we strive to restore not just NT DOCTRINE BUT ALSO NT RELATIONSHIPS.

III. PREDICTORS OF A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

(Information primarily comes from *Building a Successful Marriage* by Landis and *Marriage and Families New Problems, New Opportunities* by Havemann and Lehtinen)

Although each does not involve clear moral choices, the following criteria, if followed, will prove to be the path of wisdom. Couples following all of these steps can go to the altar with over a 95% chance of being successfully married!

A. HAD PREMARITAL CONFIDENCE: "Commit your works unto Jehovah and your purposes will be established" (Prov. 16:3).

1. **Never go to the altar with any doubts.** Don't let pressure from family or friends cloud your reasoning or cause you to ignore "red flags." Don't let fear of being alone or of losing someone you care about cause you to make a life time vow with someone whom you have doubts. *It is better to walk away in honor or even call off a wedding than to walk down the aisle less than thrilled.*

2. **94% of those who reported long-term success in marriages said they went to the altar with total confidence.** Only 6% who had needed intensive counseling or eventually divorced said they saw no sign of impending troubles while dating.
 3. Don't be naïve. **PROBLEMS DON'T GO AWAY; THEY ALMOST ALWAYS WORSEN ONCE YOU ARE MARRIED.**
 4. What will enable you to have confidence? **TIME.** Time is your best friend here. You have the rest of your life to be married; so **DO NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO RUSH YOU!** "Do not be anxious for the morrow. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34).
- B. DATED TWO YEARS OR MORE:** "For everything there is a season. [...] He hath made everything beautiful in its own time" (Eccl. 3:1; 11).
1. In our culture, people select mates through dating, which is in many ways a flawed system. "The best date does not necessarily make the best mate."
 2. It is important not to short-circuit the mate-selection process by getting married too soon.
 - a. Dr. James Dobson reports, "One-half of all couples who date into the second year break up sometime during that second year." What happens if you get married after a year? *You are stuck with someone whom, once you got to know better, you would not have chosen to marry.* You will either divorce, or stay married but feel cheated.
 - b. If you want **PREMARITAL CONFIDENCE**, date a minimum of two years, spending quality time with each other and each other's families.
- C. SOUGHT THE SUPPORT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS:** "In a multitude of counselors a thing shall be established [...]" (Prov. 15:22).
1. Happy couples understand that one "marries" not only the spouse but the spouse's family! You will need their support. Listen to their advice, and let it help you avoid mistakes.
 2. Women: **give your parents veto power.** Do not become emotionally involved with someone until you are sure that your parents, especially your father, who is to give you away, approves.
 - a. The old custom of "asking for the daughter's hand in marriage from the father" resulted from the wisdom and perception of centuries of experience, and it should be heeded. Those cultures that still practice this custom have drastically lower divorce rates.
 - b. "Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise)." (Eph. 6:2).
 3. **RED FLAG: If your best friends and parents** are concerned or not sure about a perspective mate, they probably see things you don't. Be careful in the early stages of courtship. Love can be blind.
- D. MARRIED IN A FORMAL WEDDING RATHER THAN ELOPING.**
1. When you elope, you rob yourself and other families of precious memories.

2. You also lose the bond, participation and support of family and friends, which are vital to your marriage. "Woe to him who is alone when he falleth and does not have another to pick him up!" (Eccl. 4:10).
 3. Eloping usually includes a Justice of the Peace instead of a preacher, who takes marrying seriously and would help the couple write their own vows.
 4. You set a negative example by eloping. Is that what you want for your children?
- E. HAD A FORMAL ENGAGEMENT RATHER THAN AN "UNDERSTANDING."**
1. Our society has become casual, treating sober, eternal, and sacred things lightly.
 - a. In America, **only 1 out of 3 engagements end in marriage.** Apparently, engagement does not mean "Yes," but "Maybe, if I don't change my mind between now and then."
 - b. Many couples talk about getting married "someday." Without a formal proposal with its definite "Yes" or "No" followed by acceptance of a ring as an identifiable event, the commitment and emotional bond is lessened.
 2. My Dad used to advise (and he was right), "**LONG COURTSHIPS; SHORT ENGAGEMENTS.**" I recommend a courtship period of at least two years and an engagement not exceeding six months. It is very hard to maintain purity for longer than six months.
- F. PRESERVED PURITY UNTIL MARRIAGE:** "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4).
1. Stand at the altar and be able to say: "*Then I was in his eyes as one that found peace*" (Song of Sol. 8:10). This relationship creates a strong bond when it is shared exclusively between spouses. Don't destroy how special the honeymoon is supposed to be!
 - a. Sexual relations outside of marriage fosters guilt and embarrassment as a negative long-term memory. As a thing so special and intimate, it ought to bring a positive bond and memory that is special because only the two of you have shared it.
 - b. If a couple does not wait until marriage, the wife will later distrust the husband? If he could not practice self-control with her, how can she trust him with other women?
 2. **COHABITATION IS A MISERABLE FAILURE.** The idea sounds valid on the surface. Living together before marriage would allow one to "test" another for compatibility.
 - a. In a 1995 survey, 60% of men and 50% of women said they believed cohabitation morally acceptable. They are **WRONG**.
 - b. Living together is **not a "trial marriage"** because it is not based upon commitment as is marriage. It is nothing more than having *a glorified sexual roommate*. It cheapens sex and harms the relationship.

G. SHARED VALUES, ESPECIALLY SHARED FAITH

1. Decide you will to marry a **Christian** or you will not marry! **It might be said that if one marries a child of the devil, he suddenly has Satan for a father-in-law!!** Marrying ungodly women turned the heart of the wisest man who ever lived away from God. How much more may it be so with you? **“Be not deceived.”**
2. The *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* reported that regular church attendance is the most critical factor in marital stability. A 1990s survey of 3,300 men found:
 - a. Men who switched partners most often were those with no religious convictions.
 - b. The rate of cohabitation before marriage **is seven times higher among people who seldom or never attend religious services.** This find is significant, because couples who live together before marriage experience higher divorce rates. “My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you” (Prov. 3:1-2).
 - c. In *Letters to Karen*, Charlie Shed notes that
 - (1) 1 in 54 who attend church regularly together end in divorce.
 - (2) 1 in 500 who pray together regularly end in divorce. Shedd comments, *“The kind of homes we need most are the kind of homes where two lives are being drawn together by a holy love greater than their own.”*

H. UNDERWENT PREMARITAL COUNSELING

1. The Prepare/Enrich Test can gauge with an 85% accuracy whether a couple will be happily married, unhappily married, or likely to divorce. I advise all couples considering marriage to take this test as they evaluate their future together.
2. *“To fail to prepare is to plan to fail.”*

I. MARRIED AFTER THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

1. 40% of married teens live in poverty.
2. Teens’ chance of divorce is twice as high as those over twenty.

J. MARRIED WITHIN THE SAME RACE/ETHNIC GROUP

1. The occurrence of interracial marriages four times higher now than twenty years ago.
2. Yet such marriages are still risky. On average they face double the risk of divorce.

K. CAME FROM STABLE HOMES

1. “Divorce is contagious.”
2. If both spouses are from divorced homes, they have an 80% chance divorcing.

L. GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE

1. Those who graduate stay together more often than those who have dropped out of school.
2. The key is not the education as much as the character quality of “stick-to-itiveness.”

M. ESTABLISHED THE HUSBAND AS THE PRIMARY PROVIDER

1. There are three times as many divorces among those in lowest income brackets than in the middle and upper brackets.
2. As a man’s ability to be a breadwinner increases, his risk of divorce decreases dramatically.
3. For women, the opposite is true. Those working wives with the highest levels of income have unusually high divorce rates.
 - a. She is less dependent on the husband and also less motivated to work things out.
 - b. Having a wife work is difficult on a man’s sense of masculinity.
 - c. “When young children are at home, when the wife works full-time, the chances of divorce double” (Willard Harley). The stress of juggling job and domestic responsibilities often takes a toll on the marriage.

N. WERE MENTALLY STABLE AND FREE FROM ADDICTIONS

1. Neither partner should be a substance abuser, an alcoholic, or have psychological problems for which he has not sought help. Such lack of control poisons a relationship.
2. You must avoid the person who will make your life miserable.

O. WERE WILLING TO SEEK HELP EARLY

1. When both spouses seek counseling as soon as problems develop, they increased their chance of success to 87%.
2. No one has shame in getting assistance for unresolved physical problems. Why should one have shame in getting assistance with unresolved relationship problems?

CONCLUSION:

- A. Those who are married are *happier on average than any other group – divorced, widowed, or single*. God knew what was best!! But marriage takes work and good planning!
- B. The good news is that people have begun to view marriage with more godly attitudes and seeing it as more of a commitment.
 1. It is worth being careful and counting the cost before jumping in!
 2. J. P. Getty, the great financier, once said, “I would gladly trade my fortune for a happy marriage”!
- C. Let’s stop the parade of those who come to God with the pieces of a broken marriage and family, broken vows, and broken hearts. Let’s make it our mission to provide a way to not only make divorce less likely, but make marriages better.