

## **Pre-Introduction**

Marriage is one of those topics that needs fairly regular revisiting. Having just covered a crucial transitional event in Christ's earthly ministry, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, in the book of Matthew, and sensing a growing urgency to preach on marriage, I felt that this was an opportune time.

I am disheartened by the number of marriage related problems that are prevalent amongst Christians today. I am saddened to hear from the mouths of brothers and sisters in Christ the same sentiments as I do from unbelieving husbands and wives, sometimes after 10, 15 or even 20 years of marriage:

- × 'I don't know if I ever really loved her.'
- × 'I suspect that I should never have married her.'
- × 'If only he would do this...'
- × 'If only she would do that...'
- × 'Why can't she change?'
- × 'If he loved me he would surely be willing to sacrifice in this area.'

I have heard these or similar remarks over and over again, and I am not prepared to accept that as Christians who have the Holy Spirit living inside of us that we have the same rotten attitudes and produce the same horrendous divorce statistics as the unregenerate world. Nor am I prepared to throw out the lame excuse that these problems exist in so-called Christian marriages because a husband or wife, or both, were never really saved in the first place. Of course this may occasionally be the problem, but it can't explain the bulk of faltering or failing Christian marriages.

Then what can explain the alarmingly regular failure of Christian marriages?

A young bride was so nervous she said to her pastor, “I’m afraid I might not make it through the ceremony.” The pastor soothed her, saying, “When you enter the church tomorrow and the processional begins, you will be walking down the same aisle you’ve walked many times before. Concentrate on that aisle. When you get halfway down the aisle, you’ll see the altar, where you and your family have worshiped for many years. Concentrate on that altar. Then, when you’re almost to the altar, you will see your groom, the one you love. Concentrate on him.”

The next day, the bride walked down the aisle with her chin up and eyes bright. But those along the center were a bit surprised to hear her muttering over and over, “Aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, hymn.” —J. R. Love, Rushton, Louisiana<sup>1</sup>

That’s it! “I’ll alter/change him,” or alternatively, “I’ll alter her.” The idea that the person who’s the problem in our marriage is not us but our spouse is what leads to Christian marriages ending up on the same set of rocks as the marriages of unbelievers.

The problem in the vast majority of unhealthy Christian marriages is not your husband or your wife, it’s you! I say the ‘vast majority’ because on very rare occasions certain husbands or wives have been doing and are doing everything in their power to make a marriage work without any response from their spouse. But for the rest of us, when we come across a problem or a hiccup in our marriage we need to stop pointing fingers at our spouse and start taking responsibility for ourselves; we need to ask what contribution we have made to the uneasiness and tension in our marriage and then plead with God to give us the grace and strength to accept responsibility and bring about change.

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<sup>1</sup> Larson, C. B., & Ten Elshof, P. (2008). *1001 illustrations that connect* (251–252). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Our reluctance to do that is needed is rooted in pride, arrogance which issues from our hearts – the core of who we are; hearts which are unwilling to admit that we are wrong and over time have become conditioned by the much-loved mantra, “I want, I want, I want, I want, I want...and if you don’t give it to me or let me have it then the problem is with you.”

Now, you may not be married, and as a result feel that a message on the topic is entirely irrelevant to you. I trust that you are already beginning to see that that is not so. Unlike previous messages on marriage, in which I tended to focus specifically on scriptures pertaining to the relationship between a husband and wife on this occasion (however long that ‘occasion’ may be) I want us to consider a variety of passages that really apply to everybody and have an indisputable impact on marriage. The one I want us to turn to today is found in the book of Proverbs. We’ll also refer to a parallel passage in Psalms.

***Proverbs 4:20–27 (NKJV)***

*<sup>20</sup> My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. <sup>21</sup> Do not let them depart from your eyes; Keep them in the midst of your heart; <sup>22</sup> For they are life to those who find them, And health to all their flesh. <sup>23</sup> Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life. <sup>24</sup> Put away from you a deceitful mouth, And put perverse lips far from you. <sup>25</sup> Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you. <sup>26</sup> Ponder the path of your feet, And let all your ways be established. <sup>27</sup> Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil.*

## **Outline**

- 1. Petition (vv. 20-23)**
- 2. Practical application (vv. 24-27)**
  - a. Speak straight (v. 24)**
  - b. Look straight (v. 25)**
  - c. Walk straight (vv. 26-27)**

## **Prayer**

### **1. Petition (vv. 20-23)**

- In addressing his son Rehoboam, King Solomon repeatedly petitioned him to pay attention to his words, to incline his ear to his sayings, not let them depart from his eyes, and keep them in the midst of his heart. He did so here in Proverbs 4:20, then in Proverbs 5:1, in Proverbs 6:20, and again in Proverbs 7:1; four times in the space of just four chapters we hear a similar cry, “My son, pay attention...”. Solomon clearly felt strongly about what he was saying to his son, but perhaps his son also had difficulty paying attention, and constantly needed to be reminded of the importance of listening to the words of wisdom of his father; wisdom which had been acquired from God and proven in the furnace of trials and mire of personal failure.

### **Application**

- Our initial observation of the relationship between Solomon and his son reminds me a lot of the relationship we have with our heavenly Father. Isn't it true that God periodically appeals to us to give heed to his words, and we regularly neglect to pay attention to His appeals? Sometimes the appeal comes through a pastor.

Sometimes it comes through a friend, a spouse, a child or even directly through the Holy Spirit's conviction that something is amiss in our lives that we have not been hearing God's Word and reading God's Word and are therefore not keeping God's Word in the midst of our heart.

- The implications of that are what Solomon hones in on in 2 key verses in our passage, verses 22 and 23: "Keep them (my words/ God's words in our context) in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."
- The word "keep" can also be translated "guard." In effect what Solomon was telling his son, and God is telling us, is that the Word of God is critical in guarding our hearts, and a guarded heart in turn, is of fundamental or primary importance because all of the issues of life spring from our hearts.
- Jesus put it this way in Luke 6:

***Luke 6:45 (NKJV)***

*<sup>45</sup> A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*

- Matthew penned the same words of Jesus in Matthew 12:35, and then went on record these words of the Lord in Matthew 15:

***Matthew 15:19 (NKJV)***

*<sup>19</sup> For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.*

- If we are struggling with the issues of life then the problem is our hearts, and if our hearts are sick, then we need to examine how seriously we take God's exhortation or petition to give attention to His words. Are we using the opportunities that God has given us to hear His sayings? Circumstances permitting, are we faithful in attending church on Sundays? Do we fellowship with others in small groups? Are we taking advantage of various resources He has put at our disposal? And what about reading His words and keeping them in the midst of our hearts? Are we purposefully planning to spend time in God's Word in devotions and study? Are we allowing His Word which is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword to permeate our lives and discern the thoughts and intents of our hearts? Are we meditating on the truths of Scripture and treasuring them in our innermost being? How can we hope to have hearts that produce behaviour that is God honouring in our relationships with family, friends, and spouses if we aren't continuously exposing ourselves to the cleansing power of His Word?

- In Psalm 119 the psalmist confidently declared to his God:

***Psalm 119:11 (NKJV)***

*<sup>11</sup> Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.*

He also professed in Psalm 40:

***Psalm 40:8 (NKJV)***

*<sup>8</sup> I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart."*

- If we are not personally making an effort to spend time in God's Word and soaking our hearts in it, we cannot expect our relationships to be flourishing because we have neglected the most crucial ingredient.

- Nor should we waste our time learning how to communicate better, enjoy greater intimacy, or arrive at financial agreement because while important, none of these things are of any worth if we merely focus on them and ignore the health of our hearts.

## 2. **Practical application (vv. 24-27)**

- In our passage Solomon went on to say that practically the condition of our hearts determine how we react or respond to others in three ways: in what we say, in what we see, and in what we do.
- He started off by telling us that we need to speak straight.

### a. **Speak straight (v. 24)**

#### ***Proverbs 4:24 (NKJV)***

<sup>24</sup> *Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you.*

- ✓ We must not be devious and corrupt in our speech → that creates uncertainty and hurt. Instead we are to be open, authentic, and edifying → which results/should result in security and confidence.
- ✓ No passage in Scripture is quite as instructive on 'speaking straight' as the one Paul communicated to the church at Ephesus:

#### ***Ephesians 4:25–27 (NKJV)***

<sup>25</sup> *Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.* <sup>26</sup> *"Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath,* <sup>27</sup> *nor give place to the devil.*

#### ***Ephesians 4:29 (NKJV)***

<sup>29</sup> *Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.*

***Ephesians 4:31 (NKJV)***

<sup>31</sup> *Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.*

- ✓ Add verse 15 of the same passage to that, which instructs us to “speak the truth in love,” and Colossians 3:8 in which Paul exhorts:

***Colossians 3:8 (NKJV)***

<sup>8</sup> *But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.*

...and we have a fairly comprehensive description of what our communication should be like: honest, controlled, encouraging, gracious, loving, patient, kind, and clean.

- ✓ We know all that, and it's important to know it. The problem is that we start there and actually forget where our communication comes from, whether it's good or bad. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 12:34, “...For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

When we lie to our wives, lose our temper with them, tear them down, or swear at them...or when wives are unkind, disrespectful, unsupportive, or impatient in speaking with their husbands, it's not because we have forgotten the principles of good communication it's because there is a problem with our hearts.



- ✓ When you've just hurt your husband or wife with your speech and then tried to excuse it by saying, "I didn't mean to say that," you're lying. You did mean to say it. The demeaning sentiment had been lurking in your heart all along. All the argument, tension or stressful situation did was to bring it out. But you meant it alright; in your heart of hearts you intended every word, and the sooner you acknowledge that, the sooner you can get cracking on work on the real problem – your heart!
- In verse 25 Solomon focused on another heart issue, what we see, and told us that we are to look straight.

**b. Look straight (v. 25)**

***Proverbs 4:25 (NKJV)***

<sup>25</sup> *Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you.*

- ✓ When I read that, the picture of a horse with blinkers on came to mind. For those of you who aren't familiar with the practice, trainers of race horses will sometimes put blinkers on the animals to keep them from being distracted by their surroundings and help them to focus on the task at hand. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.
- ✓ When we think of our gaze being diverted our tendency is to think first and foremost of men. But I don't think that's entirely accurate. Both men and women are prone to turning their heads, the only difference is in what they turn their heads towards.
- ✓ For many men the lure of gazing at a beautiful woman or even one that is just provocatively dressed is incredibly strong.

They're still thinking about checking their gaze, when their eyes begin to follow her as she walks or drives by, and before they know it they are having lustful thoughts about her. The temptation to not look straight ahead may become so powerful for some men that it overwhelms them and as a result they turn to pornography to satisfy their lusts, in the process creating a false super-woman in their minds that their poor wives have to compete with. Modern society has come up with all sorts of excuses as to why men find it so difficult to look straight ahead and train their eyelids to look right before them. 'Men can't help it' they say, 'look at the provocative billboards, advertisements, movies, countless websites and books that surround him; not to mention the immodest dress of the average woman in the shopping mall. Some even go as far as to say that the inability to look straight ahead is an addiction, something that cannot be helped.

Jesus had a different view. Remember what He said in Matthew 5?

***Matthew 5:27–28 (NKJV)***

*<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

There it is again – the heart. That's where not looking straight comes from. It's not some illness, and blinkers won't help, because they don't address the problem, the heart.

James made a similar point in James 1:

***James 1:14–15 (NKJV)***

<sup>14</sup> *But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.* <sup>15</sup> *Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.*

I love what Job said on this whole issue of men looking straight. Realising that looking straight ahead was a heart issue he made this comment:

**Job 31:1 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> *"I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman.*

The psalmist concurred in Psalm 101:3 when he remarked:

"I will set nothing wicked before my eyes..."

- ✓ Ladies other things cause your eyes to stray which may be equally damaging to your marriage? I made the comment earlier on that women simply look at different things, but in recent times there is a growing tendency amongst women to view pornography on the internet as well. More commonly, however, the gaze of women is drawn aside by covetousness. You were perfectly content with the fact that you were a stay-at-home mom with two snotty-nosed children and a husband who provided you with a stable albeit it plain lifestyle, until you saw what your friend had. Her post-graduate degree, her beautiful home, her luxurious car, her expensive hairdo, her freedom to go overseas because she chose not to have children, her dashing, influential, mega-wealthy husband who made it all happen. But none of those things really matter. They may not be sinful, they may even be pleasurable, but in the great scheme of things, the scheme that concern things God attaches value to, they are worthless.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist left no doubt that this too is an issue of the heart. Slowly gathering the numerous possessions of your friends is not going to make an iota's difference to your ability to look straight ahead, because when you get to the point where you finally think you've arrived they would have moved on. Listen to what the psalmist had to say:

***Psalm 119:36–37 (NKJV)***

*<sup>36</sup> Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness. <sup>37</sup> Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your way.*

- The third and final heart issue Solomon dealt with in our passage is found in verses 26 & 27:

**c. Walk straight (vv. 26-27)**

***Proverbs 4:26–27 (NKJV)***

*<sup>26</sup> Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. <sup>27</sup> Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil.*

- ✓ The most important word in those two verses is the word “ponder.” The NIV translates it with the phrase “Give careful thought...” The HCSB says, “Carefully consider...” The problem for many men and woman is not that they don't give their actions or “the path of their feet” enough thought, the problem is that their thoughts are governed by hearts in the wrong place, and that leads them to randomly wander off to the right or the left, carelessly plant their foot right in the middle of evil, and end up having ways which are horribly unstable.

- ✓ Despite what Solomon says here and what Paul says in Ephesians 5:15, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise,” we still hear and say routinely when we have blown it with our husbands, wives, or friends, ‘Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.’ We were thinking, but because of our sinful hearts, we just weren’t thinking aright.
- ✓ I find it interesting, particularly in light of our emphasis on marriage and the central role of the heart, that Solomon not only tells us to ponder the path of our feet but also to consider the path of the adulteress.

***Proverbs 5:1–6 (NKJV)***

*<sup>1</sup> My son, pay attention to my wisdom; Lend your ear to my understanding, <sup>2</sup> That you may preserve discretion, And your lips may keep knowledge. <sup>3</sup> For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, And her mouth is smoother than oil; <sup>4</sup> But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. <sup>5</sup> Her feet go down to death, Her steps lay hold of hell. <sup>6</sup> Lest you ponder her path of life— Her ways are unstable; You do not know them.*

**Conclusion**

If we want to speak straight, look straight, and walk straight whether in our marriages or other areas of our lives, the only way we are going to accomplish that is by grasping that speaking, looking, and walking is inextricably linked to our hearts. And unless we guard our hearts with great care, feeding and nourishing them with the Word of God, all we’ll be doing is dealing with the symptoms rather than the real problem.

[Guard your heart – Steve Green]