



## Ten Truths Every Christian Leader Needs to Know about Marriage

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It's time for pastors, church leaders, and Christian counselors to be the first ones who speak out against abuse of power and privilege, who speak for the oppressed and voiceless, especially when the oppression occurs in marriage. Below are ten Biblical truths that you can begin to incorporate into your ministry.

1. God designed marriage to be a loving and respectful partnership, not a slave/master dictatorship where one person dominates and controls the other. In his recent book on marriage, Tim Keller writes, "The Christian teaching [on marriage] does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice."<sup>1</sup> When one spouse seeks to gain power and control over the other and bullies or intimidates using words, finances, physical force, or the Scriptures, he or she is not only sinning against their spouse but also against God's plan for marriage.
2. Every healthy adult relationship requires three essential ingredients to thrive. They are mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom. Mutuality means that each person brings into the relationship honesty, compassion, and respect. Reciprocity involves a give and take, where both people in the relationship share power and both people in the relationship share responsibility. Lastly, a healthy marriage needs the freedom to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs without fear as well as the freedom to respectfully challenge someone's behavior or ideas. When any of these three ingredients are missing we may be in a relationship with someone, but it is often difficult, unhealthy, and sometimes destructive.
3. All marriages experience angst, disagreement, and struggle. When a conflict arises mature people engage in conversations where they discuss, negotiate a

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<sup>1</sup> The Meaning of Marriage, Tim and Kathy Keller

compromise, as well as respect one another's differences, feelings, and desires. They work on problem-solving, not attacking one another.

In a destructive marriage, one person pushes and pressures to get his/her own way by ignoring stated or implied boundaries, trying to get a person to back down, or to make him or her feel guilty or afraid so that the person will give in and give them what they want. In a destructive marriage, the victimized spouse is not allowed to be different, have her own thoughts, feelings, desires or agenda. She is not loved for who she is, but for his idea of who she should be. When she fails to live up to his idealized image, punishment results.

4. When a person is seriously sinned against, Jesus understands it fractures relationships. He provides instructions for relationship repair in Matthew 18. First, we are to go to the person who has sinned against us and speak to them about it. However, when that conversation does not result in repentance, no reconciliation of the relationship can take place, even if one-sided forgiveness is granted. Relationships are damaged by sin and are not repaired without repentance and restitution. Joseph forgave his brothers long before he saw them again when they came looking for food in Egypt, but he did not trust them or reconcile with them until he saw their hearts were changed (Genesis 44,45).
5. When a person or spouse respectfully speaks up against injustice and oppression in a marriage (or anywhere else for that matter), God is with them. When a spouse speaks up against the abuse and injustice in her marriage, Christians need to come alongside her, hear her, and provide church support and help. In practicing Matthew 18, she is seeking true reconciliation and is attempting biblical peacemaking. The church must not pressure her to reconcile without any evidence of repentance or to be a peace-at-any-price peacekeeper.

We hear God hates divorce but in the context of Malachi 3, God is actually rebuking an unloving, unfaithful husband, not denouncing a desperate wife.

In addition, Scripture is clear: God hates haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers (Proverbs 6:17-19). He also hates pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech (Proverbs 8:13) which are often the very characteristics of a destructive marriage.

6. If the abuser refuses to listen, refuses to repent or change, the blessings of a close marriage are impossible. Unconditional love does not equal unconditional

relationship. God loves humankind unconditionally but does not offer an unconditional relationship to everyone. Our sin separates us from God and repeated unacknowledged and unrepentant sin also separates us from one another. Marital intimacy, trust, fellowship, and warmth cannot exist where there is fear, threats, intimidation, bullying and disrespect of one's thoughts, feelings, body, or personhood. A marriage with no boundaries or conditions is not psychologically healthy, nor is it spiritually sound

7. One person in a difficult/destructive marriage can make the relationship better by not reacting sinfully to mistreatment, not retaliating and not repaying evil for evil, but one person in a difficult marriage **cannot make a bad marriage good** all by herself. It takes both people working together. Sometimes Biblical counselors place an inordinately heavy burden on one spouse to somehow maintain fellowship and intimacy in a relationship while they are repeatedly being sinned against.
8. If the couple desires biblical change, as Christian people helpers, we must not heal their marital wounds superficially by pushing reconciliation or promising peace when there is no true peace (Jeremiah 6:14). A Biblical peacemaker knows there is no quick fix to these difficult situations and walks this couple through the counseling stages of safety, sanity, and stability, until they reach security. There is no mutual counseling possible without first establishing some history of safety, not only physically, but emotionally and financially.
9. When trust in a marriage is broken (through deceit, infidelity, abuse, or unfaithfulness in various ways), the marriage is seriously damaged. The gift of consequences<sup>2</sup> can be a painful but potent reminder that the wrong-doer will not reap the benefits of a good marriage when they continue to sow discord, sin, and selfishness. Consequences may include legal ramifications, church discipline, and/or loss of relationship through separation when warranted.
10. Church and pastoral support and accountability are critical for a couple to heal from a destructive relationship pattern. Secrets destroy. An atmosphere of loving accountability and support along with zero tolerance for manipulation, abuse, or power and control over another individual, is the optimal environment for relationship repair to take place.

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<sup>2</sup> The gift of consequences is discussed in my book, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*, WaterBrook. 2001 Chapter