

Marital Stages

Introduction. The Bible says God wants us to be wise and understand how to build a marriage and home (Proverbs 24:3). A lot of marriages fall apart because of ignorance. A man and a woman get together and they exchange vows, but they are totally unaware of the dynamics of marriage. When you talk to people with troubled marriages, you are likely to hear statements like, "I just do not know what went wrong," or "We just grew apart." Whenever I hear these, I know I am dealing with a case of ignorance. The purpose of this lesson is to gain some wisdom and understanding about the stages of marriage. Being wise can help us anticipate and adapt.

I. *The Honeymoon Stage*

A. Song of Solomon was probably written early in Solomon's life as he marries, and the song is all about his happy honeymoon (Song of Solomon 2:2). Solomon is addressing his new bride. Boy, this guy is smitten! In verses 3 and 5, his bride responds. These are the sweet and innocent statements one would hear in the honeymoon stage, the early weeks and months of a marriage. It is characterized by the kind of feeling we read all the way through the Song of Solomon. There are five characteristics of the honeymoon stage.

1. Interest.

- a) The couple is spellbound and absorbed by each other. All they think about is their spouse.
- b) It is like the old saying, "I only have eyes for you." Solomon's bride says, "I am lovesick."

2. Image.

- a) In this first stage of marriage, there is an image of your mate that is inflated or put on a pedestal.
- b) Song of Solomon 4 is full of the portraits of idealism between a husband and wife (vss. 1-3, 9-11). You see no flaws because your mate is the greatest on earth.

3. Involvement.

- a) There is a great involvement in each other's lives; there is a lot of giving in and giving up.
- b) She does not care anything about sports, but she gladly goes to the ball game with him. He cannot stand the symphony, but he will go with her. There is compromise and involvement in each other's lives because they want to be at each other's side.

4. Infatuation.

- a) This is a culmination of the interest, image, and involvement in each other's lives. Infatuation is an inflated happiness.

- b) You are in love and everything seems great. The world seems great, you seem great, and your mate seems great -- all because you are in love. There is a bounce in your step; and anybody who is presently married, or who has ever been married, can remember the infatuation early in marriage.
- 5. Ignorance.
 - a) The fact is, while you are on the honeymoon, you do not really know that person, you just know the image.
 - b) You are ignorant about the person that you have married and you really have no idea what marriage is all about.
- B. Someone once said, "I did not know that puppy love would lead to a dog's life." During this first stage, what do you do? You ignore differences, you overlook faults, and you sweep conflicts under the rug. But the honeymoon stage cannot last because it is not real. Sooner or later, you awaken to some basic realities -- there are differences between you and your spouse. You have faults, and they have faults, and you both have different temperaments. You realize that there is more to life than just having fun.

II. ***The Realization Stage***

- A. Solomon describes the realization stage in some of his proverbs. Solomon probably wrote his proverbs as he was approaching middle-age. You will see a little difference in them compared to the Song of Solomon (Proverbs 19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15-16). This is the same man who wrote, "Honey, you are like a lily among the thorns." What happened? His delight turned to disenchantment, and the romance turned to resentment.
- B. There are several characteristics of the realization stage.
 1. First, couples become drab. After a while, it is back to the routine and boredom sits in. You become complacent in appearance, conversation, and attitude. Someone said that chivalry a year after the wedding is letting your wife get both feet in the car before you put it in reverse!
 2. Second, there are differences. There were differences before, but you never noticed them. Now you begin to really focus on the differences between you and your spouse.
 3. Third, there are disagreements. You begin to clash over your differences; the arguing creates strife in your marriage. Earlier, Solomon said, "Everything she does is right. There is not a flaw in her." Now in Proverbs he says, "Nothing she does is right." There is nagging, criticism, and complaining. Respect begins to disappear. Somebody once said, "The way to bury your marriage is with a lot of little digs."

4. Fourth, it leads to defensiveness. So many times, stage two of the marriage is marked by accelerating disagreements, and couples withdrawing from one another. You start protecting yourself, you are not as open, you are not as communicative, and you shield your feelings and thoughts so as to not be vulnerable. Why? Because you are afraid they may be used against you. Men are particularly susceptible to withdrawing in stage two. They just talking, they clam up, and create distance between themselves and their mate.
 5. Finally, couples encounter disenchantment. There are disappointments, disillusionments, and unfulfilled feelings. Couples honestly feel trapped, and as they get to this stage, they begin to doubt. Did I marry the right person? Did I make a mistake? Why did I not listen to my mother?
- C. If the five "D's" are not dealt with quickly, they can lead to the two big "D's," which are Depression and Divorce. You either leave your mate, endure the misery, or sometimes both. Stage one is marked by, "You make me feel so great!" Stage two is, "You make me feel so bad!" Sadly, millions of marriages never make it past stage two. The average length of a marriage in America today is only about eight years. Couples go through the honeymoon, get stuck in the disappointment stage, and experience one of three outcomes: they either break up, break down, or break through. But God wants to encourage you to make it to stage three, which is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13.

III. *The Mature Love Stage*

- A. This final stage is not infatuation or romanticism; it is mature love. Mature love is not the same as stage one or stage two. Let's look at some of the words that identify mature love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.
1. First, it is patient. Mature love does not fly off the handle, overreact, or threaten at the first sign of trouble.
 2. Second, it is polite. It is kind, it does not envy, it is not proud, and it is not rude. So many couples are rude. They treat their spouse in ways they would never treat anyone else on the earth. That is not love!
 3. Third, it is peaceful. Love is not provoked. Mature love is marked by tenderness in the marriage. You are gentle and not judgmental. You are careful with each other's feelings and egos. You and your spouse are not adversaries; you should be pulling together.
 4. Fourth, it pardons. Love does not take into account a wrong suffered. The only way you will get to stage three is to know and accept the differences between you and your mate. My spouse and I are different, and some of those differences include weaknesses

and faults. She has got hers and I have got mine. But you pardon those weaknesses, and you accept your mate instead of trying to change them.

5. Finally, mature love perseveres. Perseverance creates a security that says, "No matter what happens, we are going to make it." Therefore, it is not threatened by disagreements. When a couple in the mature love stage has an argument, there is not a fear that says, "Oh no, our marriage is dying." No, you have gone through way too much to let this current dilemma destroy your marriage. This is the security that comes from a persevering love. It is one of the greatest treasures that a human being can ever find in life. If you ever get that persevering kind of love, it revolutionizes your marriage. It makes communication great because there is no fear that what you are saying will be used against you. There is a total openness with one another.

B. If anybody ever sits down and looks honestly at the stages, stage three is what every married couple wants. You should not want to stay in stage one or two. In the rest of our series, we are going to see how we develop mature love. But I want to give you three keys right now as we enter into the discussion over the next few weeks.

1. Open up.
 - a) The starting point for moving from stage two to stage three is to open up. There are a lot of couples out there who are sinning against one another.
 - b) When there is sin in a relationship, the parties need to confess and repent of their sins against one another (Genesis 50:15-17; James 5:16). It is the only way to heal a marriage relationship. Having a good relationship takes admitting that you have been wrong. Couples need to quit pretending and concealing, and start repenting and confessing.
2. Give up.
 - a) You need to give up ways of reacting that clearly are negative and that you know from experience do not help.
 - b) For example, every married couple has probably used the silent treatment, sarcasm, threats, blame, or trying to change their partner. How about giving them up? Let's love and nurture our mates instead of acting childish (1 Corinthians 13:11; 14:20). Let's leave changing our mates up to the power of the gospel.
3. Grow up.
 - a) The greatest need in most marriages is maturity. There are a lot of selfish, immature people who date and marry before they know what they are doing. Even if that describes you, the good

news is that your marriage will work if you just grow up, accept some responsibility, and learn to adapt and adjust.

- b) The goal of every Christian is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29; Colossians 3:10). The more that happens, the more the problems in your marriage go away. The closer I am to the image of Jesus Christ, the greater the harmony in my home. The closer you and your spouse draw to Christ, the closer you will be to each other.

Conclusion. I know that change is seldom instant. If it is, it usually is not a very good or lasting change. Change takes time and effort. But believe me, it is worth it. To me, the state that I want to be in as long as God allows me to dwell in this fleshly tent, is to be married and enjoy mature love. That cannot be accomplished unless I am willing to open up, give up, and grow up. I pray that as you examine your marriage you will start with your Christian life. If you are not a Christian, then you need to become one. If you are a Christian, then you need to behave like one.