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# The Wrong Foundation

“But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

♥ MATTHEW 7:26–27 ♥

Every July, a magnificent sand castle contest is held at Imperial Beach in southern California. People spend months planning, detailing, and designing their masterpieces.

Giving this challenge an extra twist is the uncontrollable schedule of the ocean tide. Like clockwork, it will roll in around four o'clock in the afternoon. Consequently, each castle maker must finish his or her masterpiece by one o'clock so that the judges can determine the winners before the tide washes every castle away.

When it comes to marriage, unfortunately, couples can experience a similar predicament. But, in our case, we don't pay enough time and attention to the necessary preventative measures. As a result, we build hastily and the marriage will have difficulty standing the test of time.

## THE AMAZING POWER OF BELIEF: ITS IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR

The story is told about a wedding where the ring bearer, a young boy, walked down the aisle making growling sounds as he passed each pew. The onlookers found this very amusing, as you might imagine.

After the ceremony concluded, several people approached the little boy to ask him about the growling noises, and the boy responded, “I was being a ring bear.”

Very often, beliefs influence behavior. A “ring bear” undoubtedly acts differently from a “ring bearer.” In marriage, preconceptions and misconceptions can be particularly fatal. The phrase “And they lived happily ever after” has to be one of the most misleading statements ever composed. It sets up couples for failure, because two imperfect people, such as we are, will never achieve fairy-tale bliss.

Why do we believe the lie? Because our culture teaches us that romantic love is the pinnacle of existence between a man and a woman, as it brings about a state of perpetual happiness. As singles, we have packed away these false beliefs in our hearts. Then, once we say, “I do,” we begin unpacking our expectations, only to find faulty thinking and much disappointment.

Before we run into trouble (or, perhaps, worse trouble), let’s look at some common lies about marriage.

## MARITAL LIES WE BELIEVE

### Lie #1: “I can change my spouse.”

Before marriage, motivation is high. You’re in love! Your mate is wonderful! Life is great! The cost of change seems reasonable considering the ecstasy of being with the one you love.

However, after the honeymoon, motivation wanes. Your “intended” saw your best, but your spouse sees the rest of you. At the same time, what were once tiny character flaws in your mate become more and more troublesome. Love may be blind, but marriage is an eye-opener. At the end of the day, habits are stubborn, change is painful, and the only person you can transform is yourself.

The real danger in trying to change someone else is that it diminishes his or her humanness. When you pull out the relational toolbox and attempt to chisel off your spouse’s rough edges, he or she becomes a project to be worked on rather than a person to be loved.

**Lie #2: “Marriage will heal my brokenness and make me whole.”**

For those who have had particularly painful childhoods or past relationships, marriage seems to offer a balm for wounded hearts. Many people marry with the belief that a spouse will give them the love they always longed for, but never received.

Yes, we should desire emotional healing and wholeness, but seeking it through marriage is unhealthy. Those who do become very self-centered, demanding, and disappointed. The truth is, only God can make you whole. Chapter 5, “The Basement: Processing Your Excess Baggage,” addresses practical steps toward wholeness.

**Lie #3: “Marriage will take away my loneliness.”**

I have counseled many couples who comment that they feel greater loneliness in marriage than when they were single. That is because a married man and woman lying inches from each other in bed may have hearts that are miles apart. Furthermore, for various reasons your spouse will not always be there to meet the cry of your heart, to hold you, to listen, or to speak healing words. When these desires go unmet, an individual can be left feeling emotionally abandoned.

**Marriage is the** only equation  
where two halves do not make a whole.

Marriage does not banish all loneliness. Only when two people are at ease with who they are and have the ability to manage interdependently can they begin to relate well to one another as husband and wife. The state of being married is the only equation where two halves do not make a whole. It requires two wholes. God is the ultimate source of that wholeness, yet He does use husbands and wives as resources to enhance each other's lives.

**Lie #4: “My spouse should meet all my needs and make me happy.”**

Our culture has a way of convincing us that marriage is a place where all our longings are met, our shortcomings are fixed, and our happiness is secure. But these expectations demand something super-human of someone decidedly human.

Only God can meet all your needs. Psalm 91:4 states, “*He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.*” Your spouse was never intended to be the foundation of your life. In a strong marriage, God is the foundation for both persons, and a spouse simply helps to build on that foundation. God desires to use your spouse as a primary conduit through which He works to affect your life in a meaningful way. Beyond this all-important truth, happiness is a choice one must make within the context of the marital relationship.

**Lie #5: “We will always have that loving feeling.”**

At first, passion runs wild, and eros, which is romantic love, rules. But romantic love ebbs and flows, and hormones do not always spark. You won’t always *feel* in love with your mate.

Marriage requires faith; that is, having the faith to do what you know to be right, true, and good. Therefore, the act of love is a decision you make based on faith. In other words, you must decide to love your spouse even when the feelings are not there. What you do influences how you feel just as much as how you feel affects what you do. As a result, loving feelings often follow loving actions.

Yes, romantic love is important, but agapé, unconditional love, is far superior. To love your spouse well requires seeking his or her highest good, and that goes well beyond the romantic side of love. As you strive to love your spouse unconditionally, you will accomplish a great deal of good in his or her life and in your marriage.

**Lie #6: “Married people should be naturally compatible.”**

I’ve never met two people who were *naturally* compatible. One is a saver; the other spends. One tackles conflict head-on; the other is

a bit more subtle. One enjoys dawn; the other would rather sleep in. What is warm and cozy to one feels stuffy to the other. Misguidedly, we fear these differences and the conflict they bring. They seem to suggest that something is terribly wrong when in actuality, they offer wonderful opportunities for growth.

For that reason, avoiding differences and conflict can hinder a strong relationship. It could be that you're not being honest and open about your real feelings and thoughts. Remember, conflict doesn't have to destroy the relationship; it can actually deepen it. Chapter 4, "The Bathroom: The Shower of Forgiveness," addresses how to work through conflict.

**Lie #7: "I should not be required to make any adjustments."**

Typically, this lie comes from the mouth of a person who is about to lose his or her marriage. It's very easy to marry and live as though you are single, but living well together involves sacrifice and unselfishness.

Marriage requires developing a *team* mind-set, choosing "we" over "me." It is the same as in any successful business or team sport; sacrifice and unselfishness must occur for the good of the whole.

**Lie #8: "Now that I have settled down, life is supposed to be easier."**

Love should come easily, right? What happened to "happily ever after"? It would be wonderful if every moment were a replay of the honeymoon, where we drank tropical fruit drinks and relaxed on the beach.

However, love requires serious work. Too often, we underestimate the energy it takes to keep a marriage healthy and afloat amidst career, pregnancy, raising kids, chores, crises, sickness, financial pressure, aging parents, and a host of additional activities.

Then, too, there's the communication challenge. We assume that because two people are adults they have developed skills for quality communication. In reality, if communication is good, it is only because a couple has worked at it. Chapter 3, "The Kitchen: Feeding

Your Mate Nutritious Communication,” discusses how to communicate well with your spouse.

Let’s not forget spiritual warfare. God designed marriage, and the Bible teaches that an enemy exists who despises us and seeks to bring confusion to everything God has created. Be aware that Satan’s missiles are aimed at your marriage. But also know that the force of heaven is greater than the fury of hell.

You can hold on to the hope and confidence that, as you intentionally follow God’s blueprints for your marriage, you and your spouse will enjoy a fulfilling relationship. Jesus’ most potent reference to spiritual warfare points out that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. Similarly, when you and your spouse work to make your relationship agree with God’s will, your marriage will become part of God’s organized assault against the gates of hell.

**Lie #9: “Everybody else’s marriage seems to be doing better than ours.”**

The operative word here is *seems*. Why do we think other people’s marriages have “got it going on” and not ours? If you could look beneath the façade, you just might find that the couple who seems so happy in public is actually feuding furiously in private.

To avoid giving in to this falsehood, keep this in mind: no struggle that comes your way is beyond the scope of what other marriages have had to face.

**Lie #10: “My mate is supposed to extend goodness to me. Therefore, I shouldn’t have to express gratefulness for things he or she should automatically be doing.”**

When you and your mate stated your vows, you agreed to cherish and nourish one another. Remember, love is a choice. Beware of the phrase “supposed to.” It is presumptive, and it means you subconsciously take the other person for granted. If your mate works hard, tends to the children and the house, and shows you affection, it is because he or she chooses to.

When I asked Lezlyn to marry me, she *chose* to say yes. It wasn't that she was supposed to say yes. Therefore, it would behoove us to alter our thinking from "My spouse is *supposed* to extend goodness to me" to "My spouse *chooses* to extend goodness to me." The reality is, at any given moment, your mate could freely choose to do otherwise.

Of course, such a contrary choice for a marriage partner would mean living in opposition to God's ways and result in a life without meaning and joy. Such choices would be unwise; nevertheless, your mate is free to make them. It will bring far better results if you recognize the good things your mate chooses to do. Refuse to be stingy with expressions of appreciation and give them generously. Whatever you dwell on, whether positive or negative, expands. So choose a positive attitude and watch your marriage blossom.

Lie # 11: "I turned eighteen, so I'm automatically a grown-up!"

We are *born* male or female, but it is through a growth process that we *become* a man or a woman. There are two main characteristics that distinguish a boy from a man and a girl from a woman. As children, boys and girls are selfish and instinctively blame others when things go wrong. As adults, men and women must learn to become selfless and to accept responsibility for their behavior.

The apostle Paul wrote,

*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. (1 Corinthians 13:11)*

Are childish things keeping your marriage from becoming what it could be?

When I first married Lezlyn, I was a boy, emotionally. I blamed her, God, and my past for everything that was wrong in my life. With God's help, I had to "man up," as the familiar saying goes. I learned to accept responsibility for my life, no longer allowing my history to determine my destiny. Then I went to counseling, read books on the



biblical definition of manhood, and formed a men's group to foster accountability and growth.

## RELATIONAL STYLES

Because we fall in love with the positive qualities in a person, we often fail to realize that when we say, "I do," we accept the negatives as well. We are flawed people, and we will be sharing our lives with others who are also flawed. There is no getting around this certainty; we were all born this way.

The Bible's diagnosis of mankind isn't pretty: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). Accordingly, two imperfect people will never achieve a perfect relationship. But there is good news. We can make huge improvements. To do this, we must embrace our shortcomings and determine to pursue a God-honoring direction for our marriage. The process of two becoming one will, at times, feel like taking three steps forward and two steps backward. It appears to be so because of the challenging relational styles we bring to marriage.

Following are some of the shortcomings people possess. Study each one and see if you detect any personal habits that you can then ask God to help you overcome.

***Smotherer.*** Feelings of inadequacy and neediness fuel the Smotherer's demand for love. In marriage, their motto is, "I need you in order to live." You hear it sung passionately in love songs: "Life isn't worth living without you" or "I have nothing, nothing, nothing if I don't have you."

In a twisted way, this kind of emotion may sound honorable and make you feel good. But, when your worth and identity are rooted in another person, the relationship is unhealthy. Think about it; these sentiments should only be directed toward our Creator. Your spouse is an imperfect person who will fail you. And the demands of a Smotherer create an impossible strain on the marriage that leads to anger and resentment.

The Smotherer's mode of operation is to give and demand love. They give hoping that their spouse is impressed with the sacrifice and will give back to them. When their giving is not reciprocated in the way they expect it, they feel cheated. They may then turn to complaining and demanding love. Smotherers wonder, "Why is this happening to me? I give my heart, and yet my heart is being deprived. I deserve love from you."

Here's the deal: smothering another human being is not oneness. It is enmeshment and idolatry. Your identity cannot be found solely in your mate. Who are you apart from being someone's husband or wife? What same-sex friendships do you have? What activities give you meaning and purpose?

How do we help the smothering spouse? Smotherers must get a life of their own. They need loving guidance and assurance that it's all right to have healthy interests apart from their spouse. Only the misinformed expect their partner to be to them that which only God can be: always understanding, totally patient, unendingly affirming, sensitive to every need, and unfailing in every situation.

If you identify with this description in any way, you must know that you are significant and secure, not simply because of your spouse but because of your Lord. It will be beneficial and necessary to remind yourself daily, "I am secure, valued, and significant because of God's love for me."

***Distancer.*** Guarded and emotionally isolated, Distancers want closeness. Yet, at the same time, they are fearful of it. Their motto is, "Come here. Not too close. Go away." Their behavior is very elusive. It is like groping for a bar of soap after it falls to the shower floor. Just when you begin to get your hand around a Distancer's heart, it slips away. Typically, their mode of operation is to be emotionally reserved and noncommittal. Lifting up the window shade to the Distancer's heart is risky. Sharing their fears, hurts, and desires can appear threatening to them.

Often, Distancers behave the way they do because they haven't processed hurt from the past. Since it requires actively confronting

their fears and working through their losses, healing hasn't occurred. Nevertheless, there are ways through which help can occur, such as, professional counseling, a mentoring relationship, or a couples' small group. All forms of aid require that the Distancer risk opening his or her heart to trusted people for the sake of the marriage.

**Controller.** Like Smotherers and Distancers, Controllers struggle with fear and insecurity. At the same time, they enjoy doing makeovers of their mates' lives. They live by the motto, "I know what's best for you."

However, Controllers take the wrong approach; they walk by sight and not by faith. The Controller's mode of operation is through exercising relentless criticism. Because their focus is primarily on the negative, they constantly react to what they can see.

I know this style well. Hello, my name is Johnny, and I am a recovering Controller. In the early years of our marriage, I was highly critical of Lezlyn's imperfections. I frequently questioned her decisions, her appearance, and her choice of friends. Moreover, I had difficulty understanding her reactions to my criticism.

Why was she not being a good sport? On one occasion, she asked, "Why did you ask me to marry you?" I justified my behavior by reasoning, *I am helping her to become the best she can be*. My motive was good, but my method was horrible. Besides, who elected me to be the fourth member of the Trinity?

The challenge for the Controller is learning to love your spouse right where that spouse is and not where you want your spouse to be. Accept both your spouse's strengths and weaknesses, realizing that people are not apt to make changes as a result of being criticized relentlessly.

True love is not critical in order to dominate. It does not behave as a dictator. Rather, love praises and encourages in order to cultivate a deeper love. Lezlyn and I realized that, if we ever hoped to positively alter what we didn't like in the other, we had to begin by praising what we did like. My wife's question is an excellent one for the Controller, "Why did you marry your spouse?"

For the one who feels compelled to control, relationship problems may be so deep-rooted that the connection to the present con-

flict may not be obvious. Do not hesitate to seek out safe, qualified friends or professionals to help you get to the root of the problem. It may lie deep in the past.

On a final note, you will likely see in yourself characteristics of more than one relational style. In fact, no one is a purebred. Most people favor one style but fall back on different styles in different situations. The first step is to acknowledge that you have a tendency to be a Smotherer, a Distancer, or a Controller. But the real journey begins when you make a commitment to move toward wholeness. Chapter 5, "The Basement: Processing Your Excess Baggage," deals more with this undertaking.

Consider this as food for thought. The tenants of a skyscraper noticed cracks in the walls of the thirty-seventh floor. The building engineer called the architect, and they agreed to meet in the sub-basement, several floors below ground. There they discovered the problem. A janitor had taken a few bricks out of the wall to use at home. Several years later, what he had done in the basement showed up on the thirty-seventh floor.

If you have cracks in your marriage, check your foundation; for therein the problem will be discovered. Examine carefully the lies you have believed and the relationship styles on which you have based your marriage.

## Renovations

Name two reasons why you married your mate. What unrealistic expectations have you had about marriage? What one aspect about your mate are you most tempted to change? What one aspect about you is your mate most tempted to change? Which relational style do you gravitate toward? What are you willing to do differently?

Share with your mate your thoughts and ways you intend to improve.



## HOME INSPECTION

Do you recall the story of the three little pigs? To build their homes, they each chose a different type of building material: straw, sticks, and bricks. Many married couples want to build a strong relationship, but some don't succeed because they are laboring with ineffective tools and inferior materials.

A rock-solid marriage is built brick by brick. Using this process will enable your marriage to stand, because brick is a strong and durable substance that will prevent negative forces from blowing down your house.