

How to Divorce-Proof Your Marriage

A Series in Mark, Mark 10:9

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Introduction:

About three years after we moved into our house here in Bartlesville, we noticed a slight problem. Whenever it rained, a small patch of carpet in our family room would get wet. We knew we had a leak, but we didn't think much of it, at first, because the problem was rare and the patch was small.

But not for long!

Within six weeks any rain would cause a wet patch the size of an easy chair to suddenly appear in the southeast corner of the house. And now the problem was much more urgent. I called in some experts who knew a thing or two about homes and floods, and that made it even more confusing. Everyone had a different opinion. Some said, "It was the roof"; others the walls, still others the foundation. Meanwhile, whenever it rained I could feel stress rising, because water would seep into our house and create a mess.

Then in January of '99, disaster struck. We traveled up to Milwaukee to attend my sister's wedding. And while we were gone, Bartlesville had some nasty weather. When we returned, we were in for a huge shock. Standing water, two inches deep, covered the entire lower level of the house. It smelled of mildew and rot. All that evening we moved wet furniture and ripped up soggy carpet, dragging it to the garage.

But the rains still came, and the water still flowed into our house. In desperation, we ripped out the sheet rock on the wall where the water was seeping through, hoping that would reveal some clues. More experts came and shook their heads. "I don't know," they said, "but you've got a real problem."

The absolute worst day of the ordeal came one Sunday morning. Bartlesville had a cloudburst that dumped something like four inches of water in less than two hours. A river of water began to pour into our house. Neighbors came to help, my boys were pressed into service, and for the next ten hours, we used two wet vacs to suck up water and cart it to the backyard. We figure we hauled off close to 200 gallons by day's end.

With no other answers forthcoming, we decided to go for the radical solution: lay a deep French drain, in gravel, going the entire width of our property. And then caulk like crazy.

Randy Lawrence came with his backhoe and expertly installed the French drain. We packed cement under our patio where soil erosion created space for water. And we caulked every visible crack on the patio steps, every gap in the wood siding, and every gap on the roof of our house.

We even got a special waterproof paint to cover the masonry. After all that was done. I purchased some flood insurance...just to be sure. I wanted to do whatever it took to waterproof the house. And it worked! Our house has been dry now for three years. And what a feeling of peace that is on a stormy night!

But, you know, just like we needed to waterproof our house against the storms outside, periodically you need to divorce-proof your marriage against the negative influences of our culture and against the temptations of your sinful nature.

Like the problem with our house, sometimes the solutions to marriage problems are not all that simple to figure out. It takes wisdom and a lot of work to truly discern, "Why are we struggling like this?" And like the problem with our house, sometimes you've got to adopt a radical solution to divorce-proof your marriage.

Well, let me define what it means to divorce proof your marriage. It means two things: you confront your own sinfulness in humility, and you build a collection of skills to grow the relationship. Let me say that again: divorce proofing your marriage means look clearly at the problems you bring into the relationship, and you build a collection of skills to nurture your marriage.

For the past two weeks we have been looking at Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce in Mark 10. And I want to continue in Mark 10 today, but only briefly. In Mark 10:9 Jesus commands us not to divorce our spouses. "What God has joined together, let no man separate." Now to help us apply this command, I want to show you – from the Bible – how to divorce-proof your marriage.

There are two key steps in doing this:

1. **THE FIRST STEP IS HUMILITY** – If you want to divorce proof your marriage, you've got to be willing to see the sin you bring into the relationship. Genesis 2:24—3:19

A. Now to understand how sin stains every marriage, I want to go back to the fall of Adam and Even into sin.

Let me refresh your memory about the reality fall. The greatest seven days of all time were the seven days of creation. On the macro level, God created stars and planets and solar systems. He spun galaxies into outer space. On the micro level, God created electrons to spin around the nucleus of an atom; he created the double helix of the DNA molecule. He even created all that sub-atomic stuff – the quarks – that we still can't figure out.

But his crowning creation was man and woman. In all the vastness of outer space, God shifts his focus to planet earth, and out of the dust of the ground he creates Adam: the first man. He immediately asks Adam to invest all his creative energies into the leadership and organization of the Garden of Eden, and Adam throws himself into the task with zeal. But Adam quickly realizes that he has a huge problem. Every other animal has someone that corresponds to it. For every male there is a corresponding female. But there is no female for Adam.

Now that Adam is conscious of his need, God places him into a deep sleep, and he forms Eve. Moses describes her creation in Genesis 2:7 as a stunning artistic masterpiece. She is the pinnacle of God's creation. And when God wakes Adam and presents Eve, he is astounded. This is Adam's response: in the Hebrew language it's literally, "This now at last!" In those four words you hear all the hopes and dreams of a lifetime. Adam has found the love of his life. Eve finds a man who will fulfill her deepest needs.

And as the second chapter of Genesis closes we see these amazing words. "The man and his wife were naked and unashamed." That is a powerful picture. Yes, they were naked physically: no doubt about that. But they're experiencing something far more powerful than physical nakedness.

They have complete emotional, and spiritual, and intellectual transparency. Adam can discern what Eve is thinking and feeling and respond with love. Eve can discern what Adam is thinking and feeling and respond in love. There is a depth of emotional and spiritual connection that brings deep satisfaction. This is as good as it gets.

Incredibly however, they gave it all away.

They had everything! God set them as co-rulers with power and creativity. They were granted freedom to accomplish all their hearts desired.

But there was one matter that God prohibited. "Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in the middle of the garden," he said. Why that tree? This was a test of their obedience. If Adam and Eve obeyed, they would be confirmed in holiness, and the entire race would be without sin. If they failed, they would become fallen, and the race would inherit a sin nature. As we all well know, they failed the test. Satan drew near. He tempted them both, and they were lured into sin.

Immediately the consequences come crashing in upon them. They both inherit a sinful nature. That nature twists and darkens their closest love relationships. Now there is disharmony in their marriage and rebellion toward God.

Every one of us since then is fallen; all of us have that same sin nature. Because of sin, we default to selfishness and me-ism and evil. We see this especially in marriage. And in the rest of Genesis chapter three, we discover four problems that are going to be present in every marriage – without exception.

The first problem Adam and Eve encounter is hiding. Look at Genesis 3:7. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made loin coverings. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden."

B. When we're conscious of sin we hide from our spouse and we will hide from God.

What do Adam and Eve immediately feel? Vulnerable! They look at each other, and their nakedness is no longer a blessing. It's a curse. Eve looks at Adam and thinks, "He's going to see my faults. He's going to criticize and shame me." And she makes a covering for herself. Adam looks at Eve and realizes, "She's going to see that I'm not as strong as the image I project. I need to save face in front of my wife." So he makes a covering for himself. They're hiding.

Then they hear the sound of God walking in the Garden for his regular time of fellowship. And his very footsteps bring terror. They realize that their meager coverings aren't going to hide anything from God. God has, like, x-ray vision. The God who made their very souls has the capacity to peer into their souls and see all the brokenness that lurks within. So they run and they hide.

Now ever since Adam and Eve, we have been running and hiding from God and others as soon as we become conscious of our sinful badness. Why do we hide? We don't want to be exposed.

I remember the first time in my life that I became aware of my sinful badness, and my need to hide. I was probably five or six years old. We had just moved to Short Hills NJ, and there was a candy store within walking distance. One day I observed a stray ten-cent piece on my mother's dresser. "Take it," I thought. "It'll buy two large candy bars." Now you might think that's no big deal: 10 cents. But in my mind it was. I knew it was wrong to take it, but I also wanted the candy.

So I consciously turned around to see if she was looking. I swiped it, and placed it in my pocket. Somehow my mom found out about it, and she confronted me. It wasn't the money; it was the principle of the thing. And when she left the room I crawled under my bed, as far back as I could, and hid there for a long time. I was conscious of my sinful badness; and I hated the fact that I had been exposed. That was just the first time (at least that I can remember), but I've been tempted to hide many times since then.

We do this all the time as couples.

We hide things from each other. There was a time in our marriage when I was critical of Cindy's weight. That was obviously not a good thing, obviously not a loving thing. And there were times when I would micromanage her eating. Like, I'd serve her up very small portions at dinner. Or, I would say, "Do you really need to be eating that." I would close up bags of chips and dip, giving the not so subtle hint, "No more."

But at the same time, I'd return to the kitchen when Cindy wasn't there, and I would serve up big bowl of cereal for myself. I would munch on Pop Tarts and cookies. But if I heard Cindy coming toward the kitchen, I'd quick hide the food. Why was I doing that? I was hiding from her that my eating was out of control. Why was I hiding that? I was conscious of my hypocritical standards, and I didn't want my hypocrisy to be exposed.

As a pastoral counselor, one of the ways I can tell about the relative health of a marriage is by the level of hiding that is going on. If spouses are hiding their spending habits, there's trouble. If

spouses are hiding computer Internet activities, there's trouble. If spouses are hiding their whereabouts during business travel, there's trouble. If spouses are hiding their involvement in relationships with the opposite sex, there is serious trouble. Hiding is part of the sinful human condition, and it is the first thing to show up when marriages start to fail.

And what I find is that when we start to hide stuff from our spouses, we'll also start to hide things from God. Bottom line is we'll just stop talking to him.

Here's a second problem.

C. Blameshifting – When we fail in the relationships we shift the blame to avoid the pain.

Look at Genesis 3:11. God says to Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And here's Adam's reply. "The woman who you gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Blameshifting! Adam is actually blaming God: "The woman you gave to be with me." Like, "It's your fault, God."

So now God addresses Eve. "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Blameshifting again! No one wants to accept responsibility. Why? It is such a blow to our sinful pride to admit that we're wrong. We'd rather destroy those we love than have to admit that!

I'm sure you see yourself in the responses of Adam and Eve. Just think about how often we use the words, "always" and "never" in a fight.

"You never remember to take out the trash." Oh yeah...

"You always criticize me in front of my friends."

"You never clean up the house."

"You always make a mess in the kitchen."

"You never help me with the kids."

The "always" and the "never" words show that we are hopelessly addicted to shifting blame onto our spouse even when some things may be our fault.

A spouse may have even violated his or her marriage vows by carrying on an affair. Now that's a stunning blow to a marriage. If ever there was a time for a spouse to say, "I have dealt you a terrible injustice! Please forgive me." it's then. But when the confrontation takes place, many spouses will say something like this.

"It's your fault. You drove me to it by your incessant criticisms."

"It's your fault. You lured me into it by your workaholic, never-at-home lifestyle."

"It's your fault. Your perfectionism has made me feel completely inadequate."

Now there may even be a shred of truth in each of those excuses. But the immediate response is blameshifting. We all bring this tendency into our marriages, and it is immensely destructive.

Here's the third problem we bring into marriage.

D. Disconnection – Men and women naturally find their identity in completely different spheres.

In Genesis 3:16-19, God addresses the couple and lays out the consequences of their sin on their marriage. To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you will bring forth children. This sentence is pregnant with meaning (no pun intended). The Hebrew literally means, "I will greatly multiply your pain in the entire process that begins with conception."

In other words, motherhood will be inherently painful. It will begin with the physical pain of labor and delivery, and it will continue with the emotional pain of bringing up children who will ultimately leave the nest.

Moms from time immemorial have experienced this: You bring your precious child into the world, and you are far more vulnerable to pain than your husband. You agonize over childrearing at every stage of their development. And when they leave the nest, you feel the pain all over again.

In other words, women tend to find meaning in life in the context of their relationships – especially within their families. And yet, these relationships are very painful. To get even more specific, under pressure, women place more emphasis on meeting the needs of their children than their husbands. And yet their relationships with their children often bring them the pain of self-doubt and unmet expectations.

On the other hand a man's identity is not found primarily in his relationships at home, but in his career outside the home. Notice how God addresses Adam in Genesis 3:17: Then to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." The consequences are going to hit Adam in the arena of his work.

He's going to spend long hours at work. He is going to find his identity in his work. His work is going to become so all-consuming it's going to pull him out of the home for longer and longer periods of time. And there will be seasons of his career in which his wife and children will represent a frustrating intrusion in his passion to succeed.

Now do you see the automatic disconnect between husbands and wives? Women seek meaning through relationships, particularly within the family. Men seek meaning through work, particularly through career accomplishments. It doesn't matter whether you live in an agrarian society like theirs or an information rich society like ours. These same general patterns still hold true, and they produce the same kinds of conflict in relationships.

- Wife says, "You don't care about our family. All you care about is your precious work. I need more support from you."
- Husband says, "Hey, I bring home a nice paycheck. Doesn't that count for something? If I can

just reach this next career goal, life is going to change. I promise."

But the problem is much deeper. It goes back to the fall. Husbands and wives will always struggle with the source of their identity and the disconnection it brings into their marriage. That leads to a fourth typical problem.

E. Power struggles – Spouses control each other to get our needs met.

There is an ominous phrase at the very end of verse 16 that explains volumes about the fundamental condition of marriage. Addressing the woman God says, "Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

The Hebrew word for desire is not physical desire, but desire to control...desire to master. That's how the word is used in Genesis 4:7. In that verse, God says that sin's desire is for Cain. Sin will attempt to control Cain and master him. This desire to control is part of sinful fallen femininity. A woman will feel frustrated that her husband is not meeting her deep needs for relationship, and she will control him so that she gets those needs met.

But men have the opposite problem. God says, "But your husband will rule over you." Men don't want to be controlled. When a man starts feeling controlled he does two things: he gets aggressive and powers up into fighting mode; or he withdraws into an angry punishing silence. Men will rule over their wives by seesawing back and forth between aggression and withdrawal.

This happens in every marriage. Eight years into our marriage I missed a huge cue from Cindy. She had read the classic book from Focus on the Family called *Rekindled*, the story of Pat and Jill Williams. Pat was the GM of the Philadelphia 76ers at the time, a hard driving sports exec, scaling the heights of his career, and not too involved in his family. Their marriage suffered.

Cindy read the book, and it awakened an unmet longing within her. One day she said, "Rod, I feel like there are some similarities between them and us. Will you please read the book?" I stalled. Cindy grew insistent and demanding. The more I put her off, the more she let me know this represented a breakdown in our relationship. She is fulfilling the words, "Yet your desire shall be for your husband."

I became angry. "We have a great marriage," I argued. "And then I used all my love of persuasion and debate to explain why...in great detail." I was genuinely surprised when this didn't help, and only made things worse. So I read the book. And then I criticized the premise on which the whole book was founded. That didn't help either. I was fulfilling the words, "Yet he will rule over you."

So these four patterns are the biblical foundation for every problem that will come up in your marriage: hiding, blameshifting, disconnection and power struggles. There are, of course, many variations on the theme. But these constitute the foundation of the problem.

If you want to divorce proof your marriage, you need to humbly recognize how you are bringing these four issues into your marriage. I've wished many times for our own personal referee to

suddenly appear in the midst of conflict in our marriage. Wouldn't that be great? Guy shows up like a hockey ref with black pants and striped shirt and a whistle. As the conflict heats up, he suddenly intervenes, blows his whistle, and shouts, "blameshifting!" Two minutes in the penalty box. "Your hiding!" Your spouse gets a free shot on goal.

That obviously is not going to happen, but if you're going to divorce-proof your marriage, you need to be your own internal referee that monitors your own response. When you see yourself going into blameshift mode, deal with it!

Some people have objected to me when I've said this: "But the emotions are too strong! I can't control myself." I understand; I face the same struggle. But may I remind you that you do have the Holy Spirit. And he promises to provide you with self-control if you will trust him for it.

F. So what do we learn from Genesis 2-3?

All marriages contain pain. The question is how are you going to deal with it? There really aren't that many options.

You can try to change your mate. You can be like Henry Higgins in the movie *My Fair Lady* and change your spouse so that he or she fits your idea of what you really want. But that doesn't really work. That's the opposite of unconditional love. And when you try to change your mate it just infuriates your spouse and really creates an atmosphere of rebellion.

You can try to change yourself. This is a very noble thing. And in the healthiest marriages, couples are constantly seeking to change themselves through personal spiritual growth. However, there is a limit to how much you are going to be able to change your basic personality. Our personalities are pretty much formed by the age of five, and then reinforced by the circumstances of life between age five and college graduation. There's not much we can change about our basic personalities.

Another option is that you can become miserable. The sad truth is that this is how many couples end up. Unmet expectations bring bitterness and contempt, and couples live for many years thinking ugly thoughts and saying ugly words. What a tragedy! Sometimes you see couples that are the stereotype of the grumpy old man and the nagging old woman.

But the other option is to forge a relationship. In the midst of your male-female differences, in the midst of your sinfulness, in the midst of your personality differences, it is possible to forge a lasting and loving relationship. But how?

Now let me say something very important. A good marriage is not about luck or about finding someone who makes you feel the best. Marriage is a skills-based relationship. It's about learning and applying certain relationship skills in the power of the Holy Spirit. Develop the skills and you will divorce-proof your marriage. But you'll do much more than that. You'll build a love for a lifetime. So...

2. THE 2ND STEP IS, DEVELOP THE SKILLS – To divorce proof your marriage, weave these

five skills into your relationship in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now I don't have the time to go into these in depth this morning. I just want to give you the overview and then recommend some additional resources. But here's the first.

A. This first skill is this: continually reaffirm your commitment.

Now, you might not initially think about this as a skill, but let me explain what I mean. The world's view of commitment is that it's based upon feelings. "I'll be committed to you just so long as you meet my needs." "I'll be committed just so long as the commitment doesn't involved too much sacrifice and pain." Divorce is rampant in our culture because commitment is based on feelings.

In God's economy commitment is radically different. When you got married you made a covenant before God that you would fulfill your role as husband or wife... "in sickness and health, in prosperity and poverty, in joy and in sorrow," for the rest of your life. Now for most of us, those weren't just words; we really meant them.

So the challenge is this: get skillful at reaffirming that commitment in good times and bad times. Now you might be thinking, "Do I really have to say it? I mean if I said it then shouldn't that be enough?" No, it's not enough, and yes you really have to say it. With the divorce rate reaching above 50% in some places, verbalizing commitment is a crucial skill of marital communication.

So how do you express that commitment? State it verbally. "I am committed to our marriage." It's important to say thing in the good times as an expression of your love. Say it over a romantic dinner. "Honey, I love you, and for as long as I live I will be committed to you." Now let me tell you the rules.

Guys if you say this to your wife, it is okay if she simply says, "Thank you." Now, she may say more, but if that's all she says, that's okay. But if she expresses her unconditional commitment to you, you've got to bend over backwards to show your appreciation and gratitude. Why? It is generally more risky for a wife to say this to her husband than the other way around.

But you also need to say this during the bad times when you are completely exasperated with your mate. Let's say you've hit a brick wall at the end of a terrible conflict. You simply cannot agree. There is immense wisdom in someone saying, "You know, even this cycle of communication is immensely frustrating to me, I am committed to you and to our marriage for life." Now you might think, "I could never say that!" But remember, like any skill, these things are hard, but not impossible to learn.

But don't just verbalize you commitment. Live it out. Live it out through the quality of your service. Live it out through the quality of your respect. Live it out through your dedication to doing the right thing even when your spouse is sinning against you. Let me give you a radical way to express your commitment. After a disagreement with your spouse do something specific to serve your mate...not necessarily for his or her sake, but out of your commitment to God. And just see what happens...to you. These selfless acts of love have the power to transform your

character.

Some of you may be thinking, "I'm just too frustrated with my husband or my wife; I don't think I could ever do that." So, let me give you a second skill.

B. Second skill – Attend to your negative attitudes.

All marriages from time to time slip into negative attitudes. How could they not? You are living with a sinner. What other relationship is there – in all of life – that is so close? What other relationship exposes so much selfishness? Sometimes you'll see your mate at his or her absolute worst: physically, emotionally and spiritually. And you think, "Who is this person I've married?" As negative attitudes build within your soul, they poison your marriage. One spouse seems to live with a perpetual chip on his or her shoulder that never goes away.

These negative attitudes follow a very predictable pattern. They begin with unmet expectations. A wife expects more leadership. A husband wants more respect. A wife expects more income. A husband wants more physical intimacy. A wife expects more support with the kids. A husband wants more appreciation. And on it goes. As John Gray observed, we go into marriage with such different expectations it's like we're from different planets.

If those unmet expectations are not dealt with, they lead to destructive relational patterns. Spouses get angry, or they sulk. They get aggressive, or they retreat. They manipulate, or they nag. They stonewall, or they shout.

If those destructive relational patterns are not dealt with you enter the next phase. You construct a negative mental picture of your spouse, and then fit everything into that negative picture. He's just a workaholic. She's a compulsive liar. He's got an addictive personality. She's psychotic. He's bitter. She's a tightwad. Sometimes spouses at this stage will even re-program all their old marriage memories to recall only the negative.

And then you get to the last phase, which is contempt. Just about everything your spouse does brings forth ugly feelings of scorn and disrespect. When a marriage descends to the stage of contempt, it cannot survive for very long.

How do you deal with negative feelings? The first thing you do is go back to the reality of your salvation in Christ. What did you deserve without Christ? What was your condition apart from him? You deserved God's wrath and condemnation. You deserved God's eternal judgment. Let me net it out for you; you deserved hell! And God would have been perfectly just in giving it to you.

But what did God do? God granted you extreme mercy and grace. Even though he saw the horrible blackness of your sin, he decided to forgive you based upon the death of Christ. And he calls you to do the same. At times you're going to see the sin of your mate in graphic detail.

Is it your role to judge and condemn them? No! Your role is to offer grace and mercy. The primary way you deal with negative attitudes is to remember the extent of your forgiveness in

Jesus Christ.

Jesus brings forth a great principle in Luke 7:47, and the principle is this: He who is forgiven little loves little. But he who is forgiven much loves much. If you aren't in touch with the forgiveness, which you possess in Christ, you won't be much of a lover at home. But if you are deeply aware of the mercy and grace extended to you in Christ, you become a powerful conduit of mercy and grace in your marriage.

But you then need something else. When negative feelings are running high, you need a coach or a counselor who will help you work through those feelings. One of the ministries we are developing at Grace right now is a Marriage Restoration Ministry. In this ministry we are pairing up couples who need help with couples whose marriages are strong and who want to help. And these couples are going through a marriage enhancement and divorce prevention book. We're hoping that God will raise up ten marriage coaches this year who will help other hurting couples work through the pain of negative attitudes and bring new hope to marriages.

Here's the third skill.

C. Third skill – Find ways to communicate skillfully.

Let me give you one skill that you can put to use right away. New research on marriage reveals that to keep warm feelings alive in a marriage, there must be five positive comments for every negative comment. If you confront your wife with one critical remark, it will take five positive affirming statements to rebuild a positive balance in the relationship.

Now this says volumes about marriage. Communication in marriage is a very fragile thing. Because of our sinfulness, we will overemphasize the negative comments as an attack on our personhood. And we will underemphasize the positive thinking, "Did he really mean that? Was that just flattery?" To keep the balance we need to remember the five to one ratio and change our strategy.

If you want your spouse to be warm toward you, choose your criticisms carefully. Don't just fly off with a critical comment. If there is a fault you really want to point out, make sure it's worth mentioning. Many criticisms are not. But if it is, do it respectfully. Time your comment wisely. And choose your words carefully.

And then think about some positive things to say to your spouse. If you work outside of the home, use the drive home to think about one positive thing you can say that night. And make it your goal that the first thing you say when you arrive home is something positive, rather than something negative. Some people have confessed to me that they dread the moment their spouse arrived at home because their first comment – right out of the chute – was negative!

We've got to be more strategic in our communication. The emotional temperature of your marriage is like a bank account. You can make deposits and withdrawals. But you've got to make five positive deposits for every withdrawal. Some of you who loathe debt, and would never go into serious debt, are hopelessly in debt in the communication area of your marriage. Why?

You're just not thinking about what you're saying. You think, "I've got the right to say anything I please." That's wrong! To build a good marriage you need to follow the five to one rule.

That leads me to the fourth skill.

D. Fourth skill – Change your approach toward unsolvable problems.

According to John Gottman in his book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, there are two kinds of problems in a marriage: solvable and unsolvable. Gottman did a study at the University of Washington on how successful couples deal with marriage problems, and he concluded that 69% of all marital conflict falls into the category of perpetual problems, problems that are not going to go away, and will be present in some form for the duration of the marriage.

These perpetual conflicts revolve around things like degrees of orderliness around the house, how to handle finances, relationships with in-laws, sharing power and influence, punctuality versus lateness, perfectionism versus absent mindedness, and so on. Sixty nine percent of all problems are perpetual!

Psychologist Dan Wile agrees. In his book, *After the Honeymoon*, he said, "When choosing a long-term partner...you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the next ten, twenty or fifty years."

Does this mean marriage is doomed? No, Gottman argues couples can still thrive in their marriages even in the presence of many large unsolvable problems, if they will learn to tell the difference between the two, and respond accordingly. So how do you determine the difference?

Perpetual problems are predicaments based upon personality and temperament that realistically are probably not going to change. You can tell when a problem is an unsolvable one when you face gridlock, and your partner feels attacked at the level of his or her personhood.

I have an acquaintance in Dallas who is a money manager. His wife is an artist. He's tight with money; she is very free with money. Sometimes she is bitterly angry toward him, thinking he's a tightwad and doesn't trust God with money. And he is condescending toward her thinking she is totally irresponsible, and that if she worked in a real job she'd get the picture. Now is that a solvable or unsolvable problem. It's unsolvable. That fundamental problem will be with them for the duration of their marriage. They will always approach money differently.

Other problems are solvable. For instance, a husband is in the midst of a transition at work that has him working nights and weekends. Suddenly he stops doing the finances. He doesn't mean to; he's just incredibly busy and when he has a spare moment he wants to spend it with his young children. But now, bills are overdue. Creditors are sending statements and starting to harass his wife. Fearing the worst, she peeks into his checkbook and sees the bad news. His wife is livid. Is that a solvable or unsolvable problem? It is a situational problem that is totally solvable.

So what do you do? When you face unsolvable problems? You've got to identify them, and entrust them up to God. Entrust them to God! Sixty nine percent of your problems will probably

be unsolvable, so that's going to take a lot of trust. But God will come through. Think about what he says in the Proverbs. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him. And he will make your paths straight."

Oh, and by the way, in addition to trust, it also helps if you have a good sense of humor. Unsolvable problems seem a lot less intimidating if you can laugh about them.

And here's a fifth and final skill. And I wish we had a whole message to devote to this one.

E. Fifth skill – Build a long-term friendship.

There are two keys to this. The first is to understand the rituals of connection. Again my source for this is marriage expert John Gottman.

"A ritual is a repeated, predictable event that has symbolic meaning. A ritual can be really simple, like a peck on the cheek when you rush off to work in the morning, or quite elaborate like a wedding. When rituals of emotional connection are done well in a marriage, they help married couples celebrate their bond and stay together through all kinds of trials and triumphs."

Now I want you to think about some rituals that couples find helpful to building into their marriages.

- Some couples will plan weekly dates together. On their dates they will brief each other about their week and find out what they've been thinking about or praying about.
- Some couples will spend five minutes praying together over a cup of coffee each morning or each evening.
- Some couples will send a daily e-mail expressing love.
- Some couples will practice affectionate greetings or partings. First thing they'll do on coming home is give each other a kiss on the lips.
- Some couples will take a yearly vacation, just the two of them to a place that is special.
- Some couples will have special rituals and traditions surrounding birthdays, anniversaries and special holidays.

By establishing these rituals of connection, you pave the way to develop a lasting friendship that goes way beyond simple romance. These connections build a best-friend kind of relationship that solidifies commitment.

But who should take the lead in establishing these? I think it should be the husband. Wives are naturally bent this way, and that's good. But it's a wise husband who is highly proactive in establishing these rituals of connection. See, if it's all up to your wife, you communicate passivity and an I-don't-care-attitude. But if you are highly proactive, it encourages your wife to

also be highly proactive and highly responsive to your love.

One of the things I greatly admire about my father is that he was highly skilled at doing this. Every year that I can remember, my dad would take my mom on a week-long getaway. He was very creative in his planning, and my mom has confirmed how special these times were for her as a mother of four children. But the impact on us kids was also huge. It communicated to us that their relationship was paramount to our family.

At the same time, my mother established some great rituals of connection for my dad and for our family. These rituals of connection are key to building a lasting friendship.

Conclusion:

Is it really possible to divorce-proof your marriage? It's not only possible; it's essential. Right now our culture is like a storm zone bringing marriages into chaos and conflict. Divorces may have leveled off a bit in the past several years, but much of that is due to the massive numbers of people in America bypassing marriage and just living together. Statistically speaking, their relationships aren't lasting either.

If your marriage is going to survive and thrive, you must approach your marriage with great humility and discover the sins you are bringing into it, and then you've got to be committed to learning new skills. Contrary to popular opinion, marriage is not about luck or finding the magical right person. It is a skills-based relationship founded on a spiritual unity. To excel in your marriage you need to get close to God and build those skills.