

PREVENTIVE HEALTH CARE FOR MARRIAGES

by
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Theme: God has given simple preventive principles that can help couples to maintain a healthy marriage.

Theme Text: 3 John 2

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustration will enhance the presentation.

Wholeness denotes well being or health. God wants us to enjoy health of mind, body, and spirit, including healthy relationships. Unless physical health is carefully guarded and maintained, disease may be the result. A healthy marriage must likewise be guarded and maintained. As with our bodies and our minds, our marriages require a plan for resisting "diseases" that might impair the relationship.

Why Does A Marriage Need Protection?

Millions of germs inhabit our environment. One scientist estimates there are 500 million organisms in just a teaspoon of garden soil, and that a half teaspoon of saliva harbors one billion microorganisms (Folkenberg & McAdams, 1992, p. 39). While some of these germs and bacteria are harmful, most are harmless. So, for example, when the minister says to the groom at the wedding, according to Western custom, "You may now kiss the bride," the couple is sharing far more than love. They are exchanging vast armies of living organisms!

We live in an environment that is hostile to us physically, spiritually, and relationally. The virus of sin, with thousands of varieties, and the bacteria of selfishness, equally diverse and ubiquitous, are in the very air we breathe. Marriage, the closest family relationship, is the most vulnerable to relational germs, disease, and death. A carefully crafted strategy is employed with the utmost efficiency by Satan himself to inject into every marriage some kind of killer disease. Why? Because he knows that a truly Christian marriage, with its ever expanding influence, has the potential to spread happiness all over the earth, resulting in a chorus of praise and worship to our Creator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Satan also relentlessly attacks marriages because he understands clearly that God's ideal for the "one flesh" relationship between a man and a woman is the most perfect human demonstration of Christ's relationship to His people. The Bible says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

With many marriages inside the church as sick and vulnerable as those outside the church, the question is frequently asked, "Isn't there something we can do to protect our marriages?" The answer is "Yes!" God has provided ample instruction for developing sound interpersonal relationships, just as He has taught us to maintain our physical well being, and the good news is that He has promised us His grace to follow those instructions.

What Is Preventive Health Care for Marriage?

God's preventive health care plan for marriage is simple, inexpensive, and available to all. His divinely-given principles, like the laws of physical health, will provide a protective shield from the

relational diseases afflicting marriages in the 90s. These principles will benefit not only married couples, but every Christian who has become a part of the Church. For, through the promises of the everlasting covenant, the Church has become the bride of Christ. As believers, we are all married to Christ.

We would like to describe eight principles in God's preventive health care plan for marriages. (1), (2)

The Importance of Spending Time Together

Many married couples are so exhausted at the end of the day that they have no time for each other. Weeks and even months may go by without any deep, intimate sharing or time alone.

If you do not fill in your calendar, someone else will. Make it a priority to write in appointments with your spouse. (3) You have to schedule time for one another as carefully as you schedule work, classes, and church activities. This is such an important concept that even God has written us into His calendar. That is why He gave the Sabbath as a special time for us to be with Him.

An important aspect of your planning together also includes setting goals for your marriage. Consider the needs that you have as individuals or as a couple. These may be tangible needs such as further education, paying off debts, saving for a home, or they may be intangible needs such as more personal leisure time, more couple time, or developing better communication skills (Flowers, 1988, p. BE 75). Which needs do you think are the most important for you? How might you and your spouse work together to set goals to meet these needs?

A Daily Dose of Affirmation and Humor

Husbands and wives have an incredible power to build up or to destroy one another. If they are not careful, spouses can lose sight of those special qualities that first drew them together. When this happens they begin to focus on the negatives.

Everyone needs affirmation. The Bible says, "How delightful is a timely word" (Proverbs 15:23, NASB). Charlie Shedd suggests that everyday spouses should share at least one thing they appreciate about each other, and weekly they should affirm a quality never mentioned before. Someone once said, "Try praising your wife, even if at first it frightens her."

Humor, laughter, and pleasant times will also enhance a relationship, but this is often overlooked in the busyness and challenges of family life. The Bible says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). Life is serious business, but a couple who can laugh together will find joy in the midst of their struggles. One fitness expert claims that healthy people laugh several hundred times a day (Johnson, 1990, p. 72). (4)

One medical doctor calls laughter, "internal jogging," and believes that it has a beneficial effect on most of the major systems of the body. A bumper sticker expresses the same thought in a different way: "ONE LAUGH = 3 TABLESPOONS OF OAT BRAN" (Johnson, 1990, p. 72). "Jogging on the inside" in response to some natural humor not only eases the pain and suffering of life, but is really an indication of hope.

We can laugh because we know Someone is in control and that Someone loves us and is working all things together for good (see Romans 8:28). The Book of Job says, "He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy" (Job 8:21). (5)

Religion Is the Foundation of A Healthy Marriage

While a personal relationship with God is very important, one of the special privileges that married couples have is to pray and study God's Word together. As day by day they kneel seeking God's presence in their family, their hearts are bonded more closely together. Prayers for guidance in some major decision, prayers for a sick child, prayers for pressing financial needs, prayers for victory over some sin, prayers for each other, prayers of praise-these can be

the sweetest, most intimate times for husband and wife. Our God is faithful. He answers those prayers. Scripture indicates, "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:19).

Studying the Word together enables a couple to discover those passages that speak of developing closer, deeper relationships with one another. A Christian author describes it thus: "The Creator who began with nothingness and made beautiful mountains and streams and clouds and cuddly little babies has elected to give us the inside story of the family. . . . Everything from handling money to sexual attitudes is discussed in scripture with each prescription bearing the personal endorsement of the King of the Universe" (Dobson, 1987, p. 54). The Bible assures us, "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him" (Lamentations 3:25).

Communication: The Life Blood of A Marriage

A professor in one of our colleges used to say frequently to his students, "If there is a God of love, He will reveal Himself." The Bible states, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8). God must reveal Himself for us to know and love Him. The same concept is operative in marriage. Husbands and wives must reveal themselves to each other in order to be truly known and loved. The complaint most commonly verbalized by wives concerning their husbands is, "I really do not know this man because he does not talk to me."

Why do men and women have such trouble communicating? One reason is because they are different. When these differences are not understood and appreciated the relationship quickly loses its "spark" and the early attraction begins to wane. Too often one or both spouses try to change their partner to be like themselves, or they suppress their feelings and just do not talk about their concerns. Both strategies hurt and can eventually destroy the relationship (see Gray, 1992, p. 49). (6)

Two factors largely influence couple communication. One is attitude and the other is the art of listening. One author has wisely stated, "Let all seek to discover the excellencies rather than the defects. Often it is our own attitude, the atmosphere that surrounds ourselves, which determines what will be revealed to us in another" (White, 1952, p. 105).

Listening is a matter of the heart. It is said, "There is music in all hearts. If we listen we can hear each other's song." Too often we do not really listen with the heart. We can do that for our spouses by looking at them when they speak, trying to understand not only the content of what they saying, but the feelings behind their words as well. After they have shared their feelings, we can then reflect back to them what we think they have said, and the feelings we heard them express. (7)

Listening from the heart is one of the most respectful and affirming things we can do for one another. This listening with love will heal hurts, banish resentments, and resolve anger, as well as enhance intimacy.

How Do Nutrition and Other Health Habits Affect the Quality of A Marriage?

Caring for the mind and body is as important as observing the laws of spiritual health (see White, 1946, p. 17). Tiredness, low energy, irritability, illness, depression, stress, moodiness—any one of these has the capability of destroying a relationship. How many divorces, affairs, or conflicts might be traced to a spouse who is too tired, too irritable, too self-absorbed to cultivate a meaningful relationship?

The answer to many marital problems may be as simple as a change in lifestyle habits: a diet low in sugar and fat, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, time spent outside in the fresh air and sunshine. Good health habits benefit us personally, and greatly enhance our relationship with God and our spouse.

Marriage As An Example of Christ's Ministry

Husbands and wives may provide a practical example of God's love to other couples and individuals who might need their help and influence. (8) The evangelistic potential of a married couple is enormous. Ellen White says, "Marriage does not lessen their usefulness, but strengthens it. They may make their married life a ministry to win souls to Christ . . ." (White, 1952, p. 102).

As husband and wife minister together to others, opening their home in hospitality and opening their hearts to share their own experience, the marriage itself will be refreshed and strengthened.

Sharing Roles

Many married women are completely overwhelmed with work. Studies show that when a woman starts working full time outside of the home, her husband takes on only an additional eighteen minutes of work around the house each week. Often she still maintains the major responsibility for the house and the children in addition to her full time job. (9)

There are times, of course, when it is the husband who is overloaded. In this case, the husband will want to evaluate his work to determine what has caused the overload and what parts of the load might be shed. His wife might be able to take over some of the responsibilities that are essential. Some marriage partners have found it helpful to negotiate a work contract. This provides an opportunity to talk about what must be done and how the responsibilities can be divided. (10)

Flexibility, wisdom, and genuine love are needed to meet the increasing challenges of living in the 90s, and for the survival of any marriage. The Bible admonishes us "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

How Important Are Savings and Realistic Budgeting?

A survey conducted by Christian Financial Concepts revealed that in a large sampling of Christian families, 40 percent spent more money than they made. The study also showed that almost half of the families surveyed spent approximately \$2,000 per year on consumer interest. The pressures of overspending can lead to instability in the home. Ninety percent of those who divorce cite serious financial problems as the major contributing factor in the breakdown of the marriage (see Reid, 1993, p. 61).

The Bible makes it clear that debt is slavery. "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (Proverbs 22:7). "Many, very many, have not so educated themselves that they can keep their expenditures within the limit of their income. . . . They borrow and borrow again and again and become overwhelmed in debt, and consequently they become discouraged and disheartened" (White, 1952, p. 374).

Without a sane and sensible budget, the chances of incurring debt are nearly overwhelming. Once the budget is established by husband and wife, it directs how the family money will be spent. Decisions about purchases outside of the budget should be discussed, studied, and agreed upon before any action is taken. (11)

Materialism is one sign of the end-time. Married couples need to keep in mind the effect of every financial decision upon their own relationship and their freedom to serve Christ. The counsel of the Apostle Paul is especially relevant to our day, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Romans 13:8).

Your Partnership With God

To be *partners*, this is God's preventive health-care plan for marriages. Every married couple must value these principles and intentionally make them a part of their daily life. The diseases attacking marriages are more resistant and deadly than at any other time in history. A failed

marriage has devastating and far reaching consequences not only for the family but for the church and for society. There can be no delay. Now is the time to act. A failure to follow these principles will certainly open the way for disease in any marriage. To follow the "partners" plan with God's help will cause true love for your spouse and family to grow and strengthen. What in life can really compare with that?

Sermon Illumination

One (1): We believe these principles are universal. As we have stated them, they may be illustrated for English-speaking congregations by the letters in the English word *partners*. Since spouses are partners in marriage, we use these eight letters as an acronym to describe eight principles in God's preventive health-care plan for marriages. It is suggested that the speaker use large, bold, individual letters for each letter in the acronym PARTNERS. These are displayed one-by-one as the different principles are presented, so that at the end of the sermon the word PARTNERS is spelled out completely. Where the sermon is translated into other languages, speakers may wish to alter the subject matter to produce a suitable acrostic.

P - Plan

A - Affirmation

R - Religion

T - Talking

N - Nutrition

E - Example

R - Responsibilities

S - Save

Two (2): Suggested visual aids for each of the principles:

- Planning for time: Calendar or appointment book
- Affirmation and humor: Book or magazine collection of wholesome humor
- Religion: Bible
- Talking: Telephone
- Nutrition: Bowl of fruit
- Example: Dinner plate to represent hospitality
- Responsibilities: Dish towel
- Save: Calculator, savings bank book, coins or bills

Three (3): An accountant who owned his own business worked long hours and some evenings to meet appointments with his corporate clients. Realizing that this often crowded out the time he could spend with his wife, the accountant made a commitment to reserve Wednesday nights for a date night with her. Whenever he was asked to attend a business meeting on Wednesday night he would reply, "I'm sorry but I have a previous appointment which I cannot change." He kept that date night every week for more than seven years until he transferred to a less demanding job. His wife was pleased and the relationship flourished because of the attention

and thoughtfulness that was shown.

Four (4): Persons with different temperaments may view the same situation differently. When their automobile broke down and had to be towed for a hundred miles at a cost of \$1 per mile, a husband, somewhat melancholy by temperament, was gloomy and irritable. His wife, however, saw at least one positive benefit and tried to convey that to him, "Think of all the fuel we are saving!"

Five (5): Barbara Johnson, writer and humorist, experienced unbelievable losses over a span of nine years. Her husband was seriously injured in an automobile accident. One son was killed in Vietnam. Another son, returning from a vacation in Alaska, was killed by a drunk driver. A third son, after graduating from a Christian school with honors and much acclaim, confessed that he was bisexual. This mother, whose grief seemed limitless, found healing in Christ and in the gradual return of the ability to laugh. She says, "A good cry is a wet-wash, but a hearty laugh gives you a dry cleaning. . . . If you can learn to laugh in spite of the circumstances that surround you, you will enrich others, enrich yourself and, more than that, you will LAST!" (Johnson, 1990, p. 71.)

Six (6): A wife and husband sought the help of a counselor because they sensed that their marriage was in such serious trouble it would likely soon end in divorce. In the counselor's office the wife began sharing her concerns, "We are strangers in the same house. He brings home a paycheck, keeps the cars clean, and helps occasionally with the children, but I have no idea what is going on inside his head." She went on to clearly articulate her frustrations, and ended with the warning, "If something doesn't change, I'm getting out."

This woman felt lonely, isolated, and unappreciated. When her husband shared his perspective on the marriage, it became clear that even though he desired to understand his wife, he was on a totally different wave length. To all of her deeply expressed feelings of frustration, loneliness, and pain he gave only logic-oriented, left-brain responses which left her feeling totally misunderstood.

Seven (7): Mary says to Bill, "I'm so exhausted after keeping up with the children all day, I'd really like for just the two of us to go someplace by ourselves tonight."

Listen to Bill's reply. "Mary, you think you're tired. I wish I could stay home just one day and play with the kids and watch TV."

Hearing this, Mary feels misunderstood and devalued.

Listen again as Bill tunes in to Mary's words and feelings, "Mary, you sound pretty exhausted after keeping up with the children all day. I agree, I think a night off for just the two of us might be just the pick-up you need."

How do you think Mary feels about this kind of response?

Eight (8): A mother and father were concerned about their daughter who was attending college 3,000 miles from home. They were greatly relieved when she shared with them how three Christian couples ministered to her in countless ways. Here is what she told them:

"Gene spent several days helping me find a used car to buy. Janet, his wife, frequently invites me for meals."

"David and Lisa bring me food and include me in many of their family outings to the beach and the mountains."

"John and Judy take me with them to various church functions, call to check on me, and make me feel welcome anytime."

The loving ministry of these couples held this young woman steady during a vulnerable transition period in her life. Every married couple can make their marriage an example of Christ's ministry.

Nine (9): Once, while contemplating his high calling, a minister asked his wife, "What can I do to be a better pastor? Without a moment's hesitation she replied, "Help your wife more around the house!" At first the pastor thought she was joking, but then realized she was very serious.

Commenting on the incident he said, "I can and should bring my wife flowers, give her a card, take her out to dinner occasionally, but that which really speaks to her heart is when I wash the dishes, vacuum the house, or clean her car. My wife does an incredible amount of work at home as well as in her job, and what is really meaningful to her is receiving some practical help."

Ten (10): One young couple had been married for only five weeks when they found themselves already talking divorce! The wife made a list of twenty-one household responsibilities that needed to be done every week. To her chagrin she found that she was doing eighteen of them, two of them were shared, and her husband was doing only one of them. With the help of a counselor they were able to renegotiate their role expectations, and save their marriage (see Van Pelt, 1985, p. 32).

Eleven (11): A young wife's mother gave her money for the down payment on a car. Since the money was given to her, the wife decided she would make the decision on what kind of car to buy. Without consulting her husband, she went to a dealership and bought a brand new vehicle. After the downpayment, the financial arrangements still required five years of monthly payments. Needless to say, the husband was not happy about his wife's unilateral decision. There were several implications for the family. The car seats were very uncomfortable for his large size, but, more than this, the monthly payments meant that the wife had to leave their children with a babysitter and find a job outside of the home.

This illustrates the importance of communication between husband and wife. Serious consideration given to her needs and wishes, and consultation together might have led to some alternative solutions that would have created less tension between them and led to a more satisfactory situation for the family.