

PULLING OUT AN EEL

9th in a Series on Proverbs titled, “Mastering Life”

Passage: Proverbs 5:18-19 - Topic: Marriage

I want to talk about something this morning that seems to be both controversial and extremely popular. People in America spend almost \$100 billion every year just to start it. Lots are doing it, about 4.5 million people every year. But not all are eager to be involved in this activity. Leonardo da Vinci said of this thing that it is like “Putting your hand in a bag of snakes in the hope of pulling out an eel.” Yikes. Obviously, he thought this thing offered poor odds of success.

What is this thing I am speaking of? I’m talking about marriage. Abraham Lincoln said, “Marriage is neither heaven nor hell, it is simply purgatory.” That hardly seems like an advertisement for the joys of wedded bliss. Actor Clint Eastwood once said, “There’s only one way to have a happy marriage, and as soon as I learn what it is, I’ll get married again.” This sounds like you’d have to be crazy to do it. Yet, as I said, millions do it every year and spend a lot of money to do it. The average cost of a wedding in this country is now \$20,000! Obviously, people keep putting their hands in that bag of snakes hoping they will pull out an eel. Doesn’t that suggest that there must be a compelling reason for people to get married? Or are humans inherently risk takers, knowing the odds are stacked heavily against them but eager to take the leap on the off chance that they might beat those odds? Maybe it’s like the lottery. Sure, I know I likely won’t win, but someone will, and imagine the pay off if it’s me! Or perhaps we’re just like lemmings, who rush to the sea despite the fact that it means disaster for them.

It is no secret that there are a lot of unhappy marriages, hence the high divorce rate in our country and the snide comments about marriage one often hears. Yet the persistence of people in pursuing it says that marriage speaks to a powerful longing in the human soul. One writer said, that when done right marriage “borders on the miraculous.” If we’re going to master life, mastering marriage could be important. Let’s see what The Bible tells us that can improve our chances of pulling out an eel. Let’s look at Proverbs 5:18-19.

GOD WANTS US TO HAVE CAPTIVATING MARRIAGES

These verses instruct a young man about what kind of relationship he should establish and nurture with his wife. In other words, this is about what God wants our marriages to be like. To get the sense of these verses pay attention to 3 verbs used in them.

The first verb is “rejoice.” Verse 18 says, “May you rejoice in the wife of your youth.” The word translated “rejoice” sometimes loses its color because we hear it a lot in the Bible. Rejoice starts to take on the connotation of some religious duty. But that was not what the

Hebrew word used here meant. It meant to have mirth. The sense of the command here is “be giddily happy with the wife of your youth.” We see this at weddings. I go to a lot of weddings. I watch that young couples so happy, so in love, so full of passion. I did one recently where when it was time for the bride to recite her vows she was so full of emotion she was literally speechless. She couldn’t get anything out. It went on for quite some time and began to get awkward. I was just about to intervene when she finally was able to get going. Those young couples invariably can’t stop smiling. They are happy, happier than they have ever been. That’s what this passage is telling us should be true of us in our marriages. Every one of us who is married knows what that is like, because we’ve been there on that wedding day. We look back at our wedding pictures and see those beaming smiles and the glow on our faces. We were rejoicing. Proverbs tells us that should continue on for the rest of our lives in our marriages.

The second verb to note is in verse 19. “May her breasts satisfy you always.” Ancient Hebrew had a grammatical feature that English does not have. There was a form of verbs called an intensive that you can identify by the spelling of the verb. The verb “satisfied” here is an intensive, so we might translate it, “may her breasts intensely satisfy you.” In other words, may they totally, completely satisfy you. The word, particularly in the form it appears in this verse, evokes what happens on Thanksgiving when you eat so much you fear you are about to explode. You are so full you couldn’t even eat one more bite. That is the kind of satisfied that is depicted in this verse.

The third verb is translated “intoxicated” in the NIV. It literally meant “to go astray” but its root meant to stagger or reel like a drunk. This is a picture verb. It depicts us being so impacted by the love of our spouse that we are staggered. The New American Standard version translated it “exhilarated.” The New Living Translation uses the word “captivated.” We might use the term “be blown away.”

We all know that emotional storm that infatuation brought when we were young. In those early years when we “fall in love” it can be an all-consuming experience. The desire for the one on whom we have the huge crush, eclipses everything else in our lives. Psychologists and researchers tell us that almost obsessive infatuation has a shelf life of about 18 months at the most. That’s long enough to end up in a marriage and to discover that now you have to learn how to actually love the person you are married to. We are not going to feel that same rush of all-consuming infatuation for 40 or 50 years. However, these verses call on us to be as thrilled, blown away by the love of our spouse as we were in those early days. Our marriages are to be relationships marked by being giddily happy, by being totally saturated and satisfied by love, to be staggered, exhilarated, captivated.

It is quite common these days for people to disparage the institution of marriage. If you’re married, you are bored and lifeless. The cliché is a husband and wife who mostly tolerate each other, whose marriage is a kind of de-militarized zone. No one starts out their marriage like

that. If that was the kind of relationship two people had why would they even bother getting married? But unfortunately, those stereotypes of marriage exist because too often that's exactly what marriages devolve to. Do these verses in Proverbs sound like they are describing a relationship that is little more than peaceful co-existence? Being exhilarated, utterly satisfied, giddily happy sound like something very different and very much more desirable than that.

Unfortunately, new is exciting, but newness wears off. Little Ella even at three years old had the perfect reaction to her Christmas gifts. She was so excited, shouted, "Oh, *wow!*" when she opened some of those new toys. But a month later they are no longer new and they have become just some of her many toys no different than the others. There is a tendency for that to happen in our marriages. When they are brand new and shiny they are better than everything else in our lives. But time passes, the newness wears off, other things clamor for our attention, and they become just one of the many things in our lives. Prince Philip said, "when a man opens a car door for his wife, it's either a new car or a new wife."

Is it possible for marriage to be more like these verses describe, a thing of joy and exhilaration even after 10, 20, 30, 40 or more years? We have to either conclude that it is possible, or we must conclude that these verses are not intended for the real world. I submit to you that God gave us these verses because he intended for us to experience just what they describe.

GOD HAS GOOD REASONS FOR WANTING THIS FOR US

He wants us to experience good.

God loves us, and when you love someone you want them to experience good things. God wants us to have exhilarating marriages because that is one of the best things we could ever experience.

God has created us with a hard-wired need for relationship. In particular, we have a great, built-in desire for intimacy. We all know this is a part of us. Our deepest psychological and emotional need is to be loved. We long for someone to know us, accept us totally, and value us above everything else. There were periods in the life of both of our kids when they felt they didn't have any real friends. My heart ached for them because I knew how sad that made them. I knew that all it would take to remedy the situation was for them to have one person to be their friend, to say I'd rather eat lunch with you than anyone else, I'd rather sit next to you in class than anyone else.

That is a powerful thing. It's what happens when we get married. There is this person that we think is the most desirable person in the world, and that person says, "I choose you over every other person on the planet." That is one of the most joyful, healing things that can ever happen to us.

PBS had a television series called *The Great American Read*. It was an eight-part series that explored America's 100 best loved novels. The show brought out that one theme that emerges in these books is the quest for love that endures. One literary expert says at one point, "Love is the driving force behind everything we do." Another said, "I love a good love story. I think everybody wants it." It's true. We do. It's why the Hallmark Channel exists.

Author Jon Krakauer wrote, "Happiness is only real when shared." He's right. I think about our son-in-law, Michael. Late last year he was assigned two trips to Hawaii. On one he flew to Maui, got there in the middle of the day, stayed that night, then flew home the next day. On the other he flew to Kona, again arrived middle of the day, stayed that afternoon and night, then flew back the next day. On the second one though, Carissa went also. Do you think those trips were about the same for him? No way. The second was much better because he had his wife with him, and that changed it from just doing his job to having a little mini vacation in Hawaii, because he had her to share it with. The difference between being alone and being with the person you love is enormous.

When something amazing happens to us, our first reaction is we want to share it with someone. That's what marriage is all about, sharing happiness, as well as burdens. It's sharing life, and that makes life exponentially better. God wants us to experience an exhilarating marriage because we have a built-in desire for unity and intimacy, a deep longing to be known and loved above all else. Nothing can satisfy that desire like a joyful, captivating marriage.

He wants us to be holy.

1 Peter 1:15-16 says, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'be holy, because I am holy.'" God wants us to be holy. God has made us holy in Christ in one sense. We are set apart for him and for his kingdom, made holy in his eyes. But as the verse in 1 Peter shows us, now God wants us to reflect his holiness in our character and our behavior. He is in the process of making us holy in our actions and our being.

But one of the key methods he uses to make us more holy is through our relationships with others. The closer and more open we are with a person, the more God can use that person to shape our hearts, to draw us deeper into real holiness. There is no closer and more open relationship than marriage. One of the big things God is doing through our marriages is making us holier.

In his book, *Lighten Up*, Ken Davis gives an example of this in his life. Ken and his wife had been having meetings for teens in which they were teaching them about Jesus. One vivacious girl named Jean was interested, but hadn't yet made a commitment to Jesus. Jean had a small part in her high school's musical play. Ken's wife told him that she had tickets for the play and that she felt they should go one night. He wanted no part of it. He was tired and he didn't want to watch a bunch of amateur kids stumble through a Broadway musical. But Diane, his wife,

was relentless. He objected that it didn't matter if they went because Jean only had two lines, and she wouldn't know whether they were there or not. Diane was not to be denied. To keep peace Ken grudgingly gave in. They not only went but at Diane's insistence bought some roses on the way. Ken wrote, "The play was one of the worst I'd ever seen. Scenery toppled over, actors walked to the wings to get their lines...unskilled voices reached for unattainable notes and missed by just enough to send shivers through the entire audience. I was miserable." When the play mercifully ended Ken just wanted to go home. But Diane insisted on going back stage to look for Jean. When Jean spotted Ken and Diane she ran squealing toward them. "What did you think?" she asked with excitement. Diane said, "You were marvelous. You stole the entire play with your entrance." Then Jean looked at Ken. All he could think of to say was, "Here, these are for you," as he handed her the flowers. Jean grasped the roses, stumbled back against the wall, then slid down until she was sitting on the floor. Tears started rolling down her cheeks, and her voice caught as she said, "Thank you for coming. I only had two lines. I didn't think you'd come." Davis said the sweet smile on his wife's face camouflaged the "I told you so" kick that jolted his shin. A couple of days later Jean showed up at Ken's office. She said, "Tell me about Jesus one more time." And so he did. She said, "I'm ready," and before he could respond she prayed one of the simplest, loveliest prayers of commitment to Jesus he had ever heard. *Ken experienced God working through Diane, his wife, to make him more holy.*

He wants us to minister to others.

In Ephesians 5:31-32 Paul wrote, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church." We are bearers of God's image. The greatest achievement is to display that image, to help others know what God is like by showing them his character. Paul says our marriages find their ultimate glory and meaning in displaying God's love for his people through the love between the husband and wife.

Art has enormous potential for touching hearts, whether visual art, music or motion pictures. They can do it in ways that are more powerful than just verbal messages. God wants to use our marriages to minister to others by giving them a living picture of God's love. He wants to use the exhilarating love in our marriages to impact their hearts in ways nothing else ever could. He wants our marriages to be things of art.

Michael and Carissa got married on the beach in front of the Hotel Del Coronado. I've said this before, but that day was a vivid reminder of how God wants to use our marriages to impact others. Before the wedding Laurie and I accompanied Carissa as the photographers took her to several sites around the hotel to take pictures of her in her wedding gown. Everywhere we went people who saw her, and I mean pretty much every single one, smiled and said things like, "Congratulations, what a beautiful bride." Everyone seemed happy. When the wedding was done and Michael and Carissa walked off the beach, they walked past a swimming pool and all

the people there began clapping and cheering for them. These people did not know them. They had no idea who they were, but they were all cheering for the young newlyweds.

People are longing to see love work! They root for it, they are made happy by it and they want to believe it can really happen and really work. Having the kind of marriage that this passage in Proverbs talks about cheers and warms people's hearts. It gives them hope. It draws them to the Lord of love himself.

One powerful force for making a marriage fulfill its potential is having a mission. When the husband and wife are both committed to the goal of displaying God's love for people in the world around them, thus honoring him, that draws them together. It gives them strength and energy. It gives them motivation to work through the hard things, to say no to self and do what is necessary to love as God loves us. And when they do that it brings life, joy, hope to all who witness it.

APPLICATION

Well that's all lovely, Rick, but why don't you come down out of the ivory tower and live in the real world? As much as we all might wish everyone's marriage would be nothing but butterflies and roses, that's just not how it is. Psychologist Judith Wallerstein wrote in her book, *The Good Marriage*, that after years of studying the effects of divorce she wanted to do something about it. She wanted to find out what can help keep marriages out of the hands of divorce lawyers. She decided she should do a study of successful, happy, long term marriages. She began looking for such marriages. At one point she was addressing a group of about 100 professional women. She told them, "I've decided to study a group of long-lasting marriages that are genuinely satisfying for both the husband and wife. Would any of you like to volunteer for the study?" The room immediately exploded in laughter. She was caught off guard and dismayed by the response, for it seemed to say the whole idea was impossible. One of the women later said to her, "Happy marriage doesn't exist, so I'm going to get on with my life and not worry about it."

That's pretty depressing. It reflects what the late comedian Henny Youngman said. "The secret of a happy marriage...is still a secret." But I know first hand that happy marriage does exist. I also assert that if God commands us to do something it must be possible to obey his command, otherwise, why would he bother? So what can help us do as these verses instruct and in the process find something we actually long for and need?

MAKE THE EFFORT

Actress Scarlett Johansson in an interview talked about marriage and said, "I think the idea is romantic. It's a beautiful idea. But I don't think it's natural to be a monogamous person. It's a lot of work." Everything she said is true. Marriage as God designed it is romantic and beautiful.

Furthermore, it's not natural. Selfishness is natural. If we just do what comes naturally, we will make marriage almost impossible. Which means her last statement is also correct. It will take work. It will take choosing to say no to self, as we will see.

But does the fact that it is hard and takes intentional effort mean we should write it off? Anything that we do in life that is worthwhile, meaningful, healthy, productive, good for us and others, will require effort. Suppose you want to get in great shape physically. Will it happen easily and naturally? No, it will take dedicated effort. Suppose you want to learn to play a musical instrument. Will it just sort of happen? No, it requires dedicated effort. So is it with an exhilarating marriage.

In the Proverb that starts with faithfulness. Proverbs 5:15 says, "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well." In other words, be faithful to your spouse. Don't be looking to other people to meet your needs for affirmation, companionship, or sexual gratification. Drink from your own well.

But it also means doing the work to build the kind of relationship God intended you to have. One huge aspect of that is listening. I've noticed through years of having to deal with conflicts how often the idea of being heard comes up. People want to be heard. Now, sometimes that's a camouflaged way of saying they want another person to agree with them and give them their way. But there is a real need for humans to know that the person who claims to love them actually cares enough to hear not just their words, but the heart behind them. We all want to be known and loved. So a big part of making the relationship shine is listening. That's why in James 1:19 we read, "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak." If we all just did that it would be a big step toward better relationships.

If we want to build exhilarating marriages it will take liberal doses of the same things it takes to create anything valuable, time and energy. Make it a priority and purposely do what makes for a powerful marriage.

SEE YOURSELF AS THE PROBLEM

This runs contrary to everything we think, because we are sure we are right most of the time, and if there is a problem in the relationship it's probably because of our spouse. In his talks on marriage, counselor and author Paul Tripp, says the most important thing we can do to create a better marriage is to continually say to ourselves, "I am the biggest problem in my marriage."

Until we do that, we will always be insisting that our spouse needs to change. The relationship becomes a tug of war as each defends themselves and tries to force the other to change. In their book, *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*, Carol Tavris and Elliott Aronson make the point that we all have a natural default of defending and justifying ourselves. Something inside of us tells us it is absolutely essential to our well being. We don't even consciously choose it, we just

automatically do it. And that's a big problem. They wrote, "misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love, self-justification is...The vast majority of couples who drift apart do so slowly, over time, in a snowballing pattern of blame and self-justification. Each partner focuses on what the other one is doing wrong, while justifying his or her own preferences, attitudes and ways of doing things."

Some of the most powerful words we can ever utter in a relationship are, "I am sorry," "You are right," "I am wrong," and, "Can you forgive me?" Not long after we bought the car we have now and it was still new to us, we had to transport some pieces of furniture in it. Laurie suggested we load it one way, but I had a different idea. I went with the Frank Sinatra plan and "I did it my way." When we got to our destination and unloaded, Laurie said, "Rick, look at this." One of the pieces had shifted while we were driving and got wedged against the door panel. The corner of it had gouged a small hole in the fabric of the door. Of our *new* car. Laurie said in a frustrated tone, "See what you did? You should have done it my way. You should have listened." I didn't like that. There is an odd fact of human nature that Dallas Willard pointed out in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. It is that the mere fact that someone is angry or frustrated with us offends us. It is like Pavlov's dogs salivating when he rang a bell. It's an automatic response. We want to defend, to fight back, to justify. I felt that flare of the desire to defend, to fight. I wanted to shoot back, but I didn't have any ammunition. What could I say? She was right, it was my fault. But I could have simply gotten impatient and upset with her on general principles. I kind of wanted to. But I didn't. Though I felt stupid I simply said, "You're right. I should have listened. I feel really dumb, and I'm sorry." And we were done. No conflict, no argument ensued.

SEEK TO SERVE

In his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote in verse 5 that love "is not self-seeking." Those are thunderous words, for they get at the very core of what creates an exhilarating, captivating marriage. If you want to have the kind of relationship that God designed for us, the kind that really is joyful and satisfying to the max, this is where the rubber meets the road. You live believing that you are not in the relationship to get your way, to have your needs met, to have your spouse make you happy. You are in the relationship to serve. End of sentence.

Instantly inside we start what I think of as the "yabuts." Yeah, but, my husband, my wife doesn't...It doesn't matter what they do or don't do. God says your job is to love your spouse. You promised when you stood at the altar that you would love this person the rest of your life. To love is to serve. Let's be real clear about that. Loving is giving and serving. It's not making deals. It's not, "Okay, here's my part. I'll do it if you do your part. And I decide what your part is." Jesus didn't say, "Okay, I'll do my part and go to the cross if you'll do this..." He simply went and died and offers us the free gift of eternal life. That's it. And that's love. When we say, "I promise to love you until death parts us," you are saying, "I promise to be your servant. I

promise to serve you and give to you without expecting any return every day from this day forward until the day one of us dies.”

A couple of weeks ago on Sunday afternoon there was an NFL playoff game on television. It was between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New Orleans Saints. I have no connection to either Philadelphia or New Orleans. However, I am an NFL orphan, left all alone on the league doorstep by evil Dean Spanos. So I’ve been trying to be an adopted fan. I’ve been pulling for 3 teams, the Rams, because they are the closest team not formerly known as San Diego, the Eagles and the Saints. My attachment to those last two teams is probably temporary, caused by admiration for some players on the team who are believers in Jesus. But there were 2 of them on television, in a playoff game. I didn’t want to force more football on Laurie so I said, “We don’t have to watch this. We can do something else.” But Laurie not only said it was fine to watch, she insisted. She not only let me watch it, she sat down on the couch and watched pretty intently, interacting with me about what was happening in the game. She didn’t do that because of her great love for football. She didn’t do it because she has a connection to one of those teams. She did it because she loves me, and she wanted to serve me. There was no other reason. Do you know what that does? I knew she was doing it out of love and that makes me love her all the more. It made me want to watch a Hallmark Channel movie with her, and it wasn’t because I love them so much. It was because I wanted to serve her the way she served me.

Writer Heather Havrileskey at one point wrote about romance. She described what she says is the most romantic story of her decade of marriage. She got sick with dysentery. She said, “It hit overnight. I got up to go to the bathroom and I fainted on the way and cracked my ribs on the side of the bathtub. My husband discovered me there, passed out, in a scene that, well, think about what that might look like. My husband was not happy about this scene. But he handled it without complaint. That is the very definition of romantic: not only *not* being made to feel crappy about things that are clearly out of your control, but being quietly cared for by someone who can shut up and do what needs to be done under duress.”

AFFIRM, AFFIRM, AFFIRM

John Gottman, who has done enormous amounts of research on what makes for happy marriages, says the absolute killer of marriage is contempt. Not respecting one’s spouse, and taking snide, clever shots at them. Conversely, he says the thing you find in the healthiest, happiest marriages, is a flood of affirmation and appreciation.

One of Laurie’s favorite verses, the one that is really the theme verse for how she seeks to relate to everyone, but especially her husband, is Philippians 4:8. “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.” She actually disciplines herself to do this. Look for whatever is lovely, right, noble, praiseworthy in people, and focus on that. I have to tell you that from where I stand, that involves considerable squinting to see the lovely

and noble, along with deliberately closing her eyes to many unlovely ignoble things she would see if she just let herself. The truth is, everyone is flawed. If you are looking for failings, shortcomings, annoying things in people, you will find them, because we all have them. The more you look for them, the more you will see, and the more you see them the more they form the image you have of a person. And that image informs how you treat them.

We had some wallpaper on a wall in our living room. It had been there for 25 years at least. To say it was dated would be like saying “Rick Myatt isn’t a young man.” No kidding, Sherlock. Plus, seams in it were showing and it was starting to peel off in a couple of places. It needed to come off. We talked about tackling that last summer, but had other home maintenance projects that shoved it aside. One day this past week while I was working, I was sort of aware of some noise coming from the living room, but didn’t think much about it. Later I went out to the living room and found that Laurie was pulling the wallpaper off the wall. Unfortunately, she found out that when she put it up, she had put some backing on it to keep the texture on the wallboard from showing through, and that stuff did not want to come off. So she’s been using hot water, and then later steam, to soak it so she could pull it off the wall. It’s an annoying, messy job, one a man with no real home maintenance skills could do. There is just such a man in our house, but he wasn’t doing that tedious work. His wife was. His wife could easily have gotten impatient with her semi-useless husband. “You can’t do anything else, but you could do this. Why don’t you do this instead of leaving it to me?” That would have been reasonable. But when I expressed some guilt over her doing the work, she just said I didn’t need to worry about it. She said, “Rick, you’re my hero. You are the best husband I could ever have imagined. I admire you so much I want to be like you. I love you desperately and am so thankful for you.” I’m not sure why she’d want to be useless like me, but that is a message I hear from her pretty much every day. To this day I don’t understand why she feels that way. But I will tell you that it makes me adore her even more, and makes me thankful for her every day of my life. I have seen many wives who nag and criticize their husbands about their shortcomings, who at times even ridicule them. And I know that if I had a wife like that our marriage would eventually become a war zone.

We are all desperate for affirmation, for someone to believe in us, for someone to value us above all else, for someone to be in our corner. We are as thirsty for that as we are for water. The more you can slake the thirst of your spouse by giving that affirmation, by believing in them, by valuing them, by being in their corner and letting them know that, the more powerful your marriage can be. God wants that for you, you want it, and the world is dying to see it.