

Marriage Warning Signs

By Bob Young

Ephesians 5 is a standard text for teaching about marriage. The chapter is part of Paul's longer explanation of Christian living in chapters 4-6. The chapter begins by urging lives of love, characterized by light. The section which focuses on personal relationships (5:21-6:9) has parallels in Colossians 3-4. Paul speaks about spouses, parents and children, masters and slaves. The guiding principle in the Ephesians text (5:21-6:9) is submission.

Paul illustrates his teaching about the marital relationship by observing that it is parallel to the relationship between Christ and the church. The principle of 5:21 introduces and controls the entire section. The focal point of the teaching concerning the marital relationship is in 5:31-32, establishing that marriage is from God, setting forth God's initial principle for marital unity, and urging love and mutual respect on the basis of covenant, just as the relationship between Christ and the church is based on covenant.

Jesus taught that marriage was invented by God (Matthew 19:1ff). God has a plan for marriage based on the principles set forth in the early chapters of Genesis. This plan includes (1) a physical and spiritual union, (2) that marriage partners are presenting the other to themselves, and (3) that partners are to feed, care for, and nurture one another.

Based on these affirmations and the text of Ephesians 5, consider some warning signs of trouble in a marriage.

- Lack of commitment and caring. Marriage is a commitment. The marital relationship provides an environment of caring and nourishing, both for the marriage partners and for children who may be part of the family.
- Partners are willing to blemish, wrinkle, and stain the other. My wife and I made an agreement while we were dating—we would not make snide remarks and take little “digs” at one another. The trouble with “kidding” is that it usually has just enough truth to make it painful. Since marriage is designed so that I can present my wife to myself (and she can present me to herself), the healthy marriage is not characterized by remarks or actions that diminish and demean the other partner.
- Partners destroy the other rather than building up the other. Marriage provides a context for edification. I become better in my marriage; I am more than I would be by myself. As a marriage counselor, I have always been amazed to counsel couples who are willing to destroy the other. Such an attitude exhibited toward the person with whom you have become “one” is always a “lose-lose” situation.
- Lack of submission. The overarching theme of this section is submission. Submission is not only for wives to husbands. Submission is for all. Submission is not difficult when we have learned submission first in our relationship with God.
- Presence of unresolved or continuing conflict. Conflict results when there is hurtful behavior, opposition, destruction, and aggressive selfishness. The presence of unhealthy conflict is a warning sign.

- Control issues. Conflict often arises because of the desire to control. The desire to control comes when submission has not been learned.
- Lack of communication. Ultimately, the warning sign that brings most couples to the counseling office is lack of communication: “We just can’t talk anymore.” Of course, most of the time the problem was developing long before the communication clogged. The communication was first superficial, or confrontational, or task-oriented. Healthy communication is essential in any relationship—especially so in a marriage.

If any of these warning signs is present in your marriage, I encourage you to address them. Pray about them, attempt to work through them as a couple, and seek the help of a capable marriage counselor if your own efforts do not resolve the issues.