

Biblically Approaching Marriage Struggles

Jesse Barrington | illbehonest.com

James: In pastoral counseling, what questions do you seem to get the most? What answers do you give? And over the years, how has your counsel changed?

Jesse: The questions we seem to get the most seem to be in regards to marriage and marriage struggles. And the way that we have counseled that is the recognition that marriage is a wonderful blessing of the Lord, but as you spend more and more time in that close proximity to someone else, your sin and selfishness begins to come out. And so, what's the answer to the struggles that we have in our marriage? Well, the answer is the gospel. And so, what we try to help our people realize is the necessity of a gospel-centered marriage. And then going into: what does that mean. Helping them understand that marriage is bigger than us. It's about being a picture of the gospel; to magnify the gospel where the husband loves his wife as Christ has loved the church, and the wife submits to her husband as the church submits unto Christ. But it's in the everyday interactions - how we respond to people. It's in the basis of our love to one another. And so, it's a gospel-centered love.

And when you think about why God loves us as they asked in Deuteronomy 7. "Why do You love us?" And the answer is: "I love you because I love you." In other words, the object of our love is never the basis of our love in the gospel. In fact, God loves us despite us. And so when that love is seen and understood, and you meditate upon that love, you become constrained and compelled by that love. And as Paul says, we stop living for ourselves and we live for Him. You bring that into a marriage - that type of love and grace in a marriage - and all the peripheral issues that we talk about, this is the root issue in all of them.

And so, what's changed over the years for me is I think most of us were raised in more of a moralistic way to approach our problems. And so as God has grown me in the centrality of the gospel, that is what's changed more in my counseling that the gospel is becoming more and more of the central focus and answer to all of our struggles and the appropriation of that gospel in our life and our marriage.

You know, brother, how do I say this? You and I don't get to spend a lot of time together. And we've never had a problem in our relationship. But guaranteed would be this, if you came to my house this weekend, and you stayed with me, by the end of the weekend, we would begin to see some issues. Let alone every day, every night. So marriage is the great blessing of the Lord, but it also is the greatest tool of sanctification because it brings to the surface our struggles. And God deals with those and sanctifies us in them. It's humbling. I've heard some people say, and I think I would tend to agree with this. Our relationship with our wife and the love that is demonstrated in there is the true reality of our spiritualness. Because brother, you can think I'm real spiritual sitting here across from you, and seeing each other twice a year. "Well, he's a very spiritual man." Well, come live with me when I wake up and I don't get enough

sleep and see how spiritual things really are. And that truly is the measurement I think of spiritual maturity.

James: On that topic, my biggest struggle in my marriage has been the sin of impatience. And I realize love is patient. Christ is patient. But it's kind of this odd ongoing being impatient in little ways. I don't really necessarily show it - it's mainly inward. You know, getting frustrated - my wife didn't get in the car as quick as I expected. I guess I feel like I've not overcome that to the degree that I long to.

Jesse: Ultimately, brother, I'm the same. So I don't speak from above you in this. I speak from beside you in this. Ultimately, I think what that shows is your and I's lack of understanding of God's patience towards us. And the more you and I are growing in the revelation of God's patience towards us, the more humility that we're growing in in that, and the more we give patience out. So ultimately, I think it's reflective of our low view of God's patience towards us, and it's not low - it's high. So, God help us.

James: On that note, to those who are married, what are the strongest encouragements or strongest points of exhortation you can give as you look back on what you've learned and are learning in your own marriage?

Jesse: Amen. Joel Beeke was in town here at Mack's church not too long ago. And I went to a pastor's meeting to hear him speak. And in the pastor's meeting, he shared that he had just left from preaching to over 10,000 people in Brazil. While he was flying back to the U.S., he was editing a book as the main editor for the publishing company he runs there, and he came and he spoke to us. He slept on the car ride from the meeting back to where his wife was, and he was in my car. So he slept on the way back. He was so exhausted. And his wife walks out - this is the first time I've met the woman. And she walks up to me, we have a brief introduction, and within a minute of our conversation, she said to me: "God gave me the best man in my marriage." And I'll tell you, brother, as I mentioned earlier, the struggles in pastoral ministry to maintain your marriage, your parenting, and the pastoral ministry, your own identity in Christ, there's a constant tension there. And what I saw is this man is from a ministerial perspective ten of me. But his wife within the first 30 seconds of talking to me felt the need to express to me that she has the best husband in the world.

And I looked at that, brother, and I saw: God, this is possible, and it's about prioritizing. So I picked up a book from Joel Beeke that day. And it's called I think, "Lovers and Friends," or "Friends and Lovers." Short little book. And what he goes into there is the intentionality in our marriages regarding the friendship we have with our wives. We are not cohabitators. We're friends. We share life. And he talked about the need for intentionality there. Sitting, listening, talking, sharing, encouraging. And I think sometimes in the busyness of life - parenting, ministry, or other work - we can forget that our wives are our best friends. And that may not sound that spiritual. I could talk with you about the centrality of the gospel in our marriages, and that's crucial and essential.

But personally for me, I would say this: Don't forget that your wife is your best friend, and it takes work, like every relationship, and you need to be intentional. You need to ask questions. You need to listen. You need to encourage. You need to build up. You need to laugh together. And you need to cry together. And so, I've been purposing, and I have so much room to grow in that, but that would be the counsel I would give would be remember to continue to pursue your wife. Be intentional in your relationship, and communicate and talk. It doesn't sound very spiritual, brother, but... I was awestruck by Joel Beeke just hearing in one day what he had gone through. And all that I learned from him, the greatest thing I learned was his wife's comment. That this man can be an editor of a book, a president of a seminary, a pastor, an itinerant preacher, travel the world, and his wife says, "I have the best husband." That was more ministry to me than probably reading all of Joel Beeke's books combined. He prioritizes.