

Myths of Marriage

By Ron Kirkegaard, MS, LMFT

We all have ideas in our mind about what a perfect marriage should look like. But is our thinking about marriage correct? No, says author Michael McManus, founder of Marriage Savers, an organization dedicated to the preservation of marriages and conversely the reduction of the divorce rate. He offers several myths about marriage:

- 1. The purpose of marriage is our personal happiness.**
- 2. The goal of married life is to get my mate to submit to my way of thinking.**
- 3. Love is what holds a marriage together.**

In our culture, most would agree that there should be an element of love involved in the decision to marry and that "love will keep us together," Captain and Tennille's famous philosophy. In reality, commitment is the glue in a marriage. Sometimes, it would be easier to walk away than to remain in a marriage that is characterized by constant conflict. However, there are those who are convinced that being committed to another person means that you go through difficult times with your partner and that the vows made on the wedding day were serious. For these couples, the terms "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, from this day forward until death do you part" are not just words. They are principles to live by. Here is another myth:

- 4. Love is a feeling.**

It may be a matter of semantics when we really begin to look at what people mean by "love." One of my favorite commentaries on marriage is found in the book *Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis. He goes to great lengths to explain the difference between loving and being in love. Being in love is a good thing but it is not the best thing. It is a noble feeling, But it is still a feeling. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go. *Love* in this second sense, is distinct from

being in love; it is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. Being in love first moved them to promise fidelity; this quieter love enables them to keep the promise."

I have seen so many disillusioned married individuals who come in for counseling who report, "I just don't love him/her anymore." If love is defined solely as the passionate feelings once experienced during a dating and courtship relationship, it is likely we would all be in trouble at some point in our marriages! If we follow Lewis' reasoning, mature love is a decision and involves choosing to love even when we don't feel like it. An "instant society" that wants everything yesterday doesn't have time to wait for problems to be resolved or for the passion to return. Other factors such as demanding work schedules, children and other extra-curricular expectations (school, church, hobbies and leisure activities) can result in diminishing energy, time emotional resources and feelings of passion. The decision to love carries each individual through these times and most of the time, when the storm has been weathered, the couple will be on a higher plane together.

The importance of these myths ties into my approach to life and to counseling. What we believe determines how we think, how we feel and how we behave. When beliefs are either untrue or are distorted, the result is personal and relational dysfunction.

This leads us to the next myth:

5. Only minor changes are needed to adjust to marriage and the other person.

I was recently asked to complete a questionnaire for a college student who was conducting the survey as an assignment for her marriage and family class. Several of the questions referred to the area of what adjustments were necessary when a person gets married. My responses indicate that I believe marriage is a lifelong series of adjustments. There are adjustments related to personality and

temperament. The very qualities that attracted you to your spouse in the beginning can become irritations as you live with that individual over a period of time. For example, a fairly unstructured person (like me) may be attracted to a very structured person (like my wife). She may like the fact that I am "laid back;" however I have to be willing to move her direction and make lists so that I don't forget important things in order to keep the peace. In the same way, she adjust to me by being patient when I don't remember which cabinet or drawer a certain item belongs in the kitchen. There are many such adjustments that need to be made in marriage. In addition to the differences in personality, there are differences in family background, life experiences, attitudes towards finances and sexuality and a multitude of other issues that need to be addressed. It is a major life change for both people to say "I do" and it requires a willingness to sacrifice, compromise and adjust.

6. It takes work to make a good marriage.

It does take work to make a good marriage but McManus suggests that the more fundamental need is time. It is so hard to make room for an intimate relationship when both partners are working and basically trying to keep up with the demands of life. When you add children to the equation it becomes overwhelming. Boundaries to protect family life are difficult to set in a culture that suggests that you can and should have it all. I have been very encouraged to see some parents are limiting their children regarding the number of activities and outside interests they can participate in. People who run constantly from one activity or sporting event to the next do not have time for relationships. In the marriage relationship, some adults have trouble realizing marriage will alter the types of activities or at least the amount of time spent on the activities that an individual enjoyed when he or she was single. An individual going into a marriage relationship with the idea that nothing is going to change in terms of priorities and commitments is in for some conflict and disappointment. It's comparable to a person believing that a child is not going to

substantially alter lifestyle and time commitments. IF the child doesn't alter a couple's life, there is serious neglect taking place! The same is true of *married singles*, individuals who want to have all the benefits of being single with the comfort of being married.