

Beatitudes Hold the Key to a Blessed Marriage

by John Bosio

Married two years, and parents of a very active one year old, Jim and Rose are tired, stressed out, and angry at each other. They are both working full time and have career aspirations. This evening Rose is in the living room folding the laundry and playing with Charlie, the one year old, and Jim is in the garage working on his favorite hobby, his car. Rose wonders in silence: "What has happened to us? We still have our wedding pictures on the coffee table and yet, how I feel today and how I felt in the early days of our marriage are like day and night. How did we end up feeling so distant?"

Dr. William Doherty, PhD author of the book Take Back Your Marriage, writes that getting married is like launching a trip on the Mississippi river with a canoe. You set out in St. Paul, Minnesota, and unless you paddle the current takes you south to St. Louis. Yet, St. Louis is not where you want to go. You want to go north. Now that you are off-course you are upset and you may be tempted to blame your shipmate for the disappointments you feel.

After the wedding, if spouses rely solely on their instincts and feelings to keep their relationship going, their canoe drifts, pulled by the currents of daily activities. Without paddling together you are slowly and unintentionally drifting apart. At the start of your journey you find the novelty of married life enjoyable. Then, gradually you start taking each other for granted. Each wants to go in a different direction, do different things. When the children are born tending to their needs seems to take over your life. Conflicts arise between you and your spouse that are not resolved. Negative feelings and anger are left to fester. Work, hobbies and friends become priority. The good feelings for each other slowly evaporate, the relationship gradually weakens, and after so much drifting one or both think about jumping ship. Unfortunately, this is the path taken by many couples. Recent research indicates that for many couples the bliss fades after three years, and most divorces take place during the first seven years.

Finding happiness on the marriage voyage requires learning to paddle together and in the same direction. For most spouses it is often easier to agree on the direction than to learn to paddle as a team. Paddling in synchrony is difficult because it requires a unique mind-set, a special attitude. Winston Churchill is quoted to have said: "*Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.*" Our attitudes represent our stance in life: what we believe about ourselves and about others. Our attitudes are manifested in the values we embrace, in what we think, in what we say and in what we do. As such, our attitudes affect greatly the quality of the marital relationship and the willingness of partners to coordinate their efforts. To successfully paddle as a team, spouses need to develop an attitude that allows them to put aside their individual self-interests in order to collaborate for the sake of the relationship.

Christian husbands and wives learn the self-giving and the collaborative spirit needed in marriage through the practice of their faith. Researchers are finding that spouses who pray and practice their religion are less likely to get divorced. Kenneth Pargamen and Annette Mahoney, professors of psychology at Bowling Green State University, are finding in their research that spouses that go to church regularly have a higher degree of marital satisfaction and commitment, and have better communication and conflict resolution skills.

The view of life that makes faith practicing couples more successful in their marital relationship comes from the core teachings of Christianity: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-10). John Paul II told the youth gathered in Toronto for the 17th World Youth Day, July 25th, 2002 that God created man and woman to be happy together, and that the Sermon on the Mount is the map for our journey to such happiness.

Jesus gave us the Beatitudes not as a specific formula for marital happiness, but as the path to holiness. Growth in personal holiness and marital happiness are inseparable. One leads to the other. That is why faith-practicing couples have a higher degree of marital satisfaction.

The core message of the Sermon on the Mount is a call to abandon the selfish illusion that makes us act as if each one of us is the center of the world and in control of everything. In the Beatitudes Christ calls us to acknowledge our humanness and our total dependence on God.

When spouses like Jim and Rose acknowledge their personal limitations and turn to God and to each other for help they are ready to receive God's graces and to collaborate with one another. God's graces come in the form of wonderful gifts. At Baptism, Christian spouses, like Jim and Rose, received the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. These gifts are for Jim and Rose, as for you and your spouse powerful resources to be used for the common good. The use of these gifts helps you transform yourselves from two "I" in a relationship to a "we." With these gifts you let go of your self-centered tendencies and let God's grace help you paddle together and succeed even against the strongest currents. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: *"By this grace they help one another to attain holiness."* #1641

In the coming articles, we will examine each of the Beatitudes, and their message to husbands and wives. We will ask: what does it mean for husband and wife to be poor in spirit, to be meek, and to mourn? We will explore how spouses hunger for righteousness, are merciful, have a clean heart, and become peacemakers, as Jesus commands. Finally, we will reflect on the threats to marriage present in our age and on what Christ calls spouses to do to inherit the Kingdom.

Question for reflection: Is your marriage canoe moving in the right direction? How good are you and your spouse at paddling together? How does the practice of the Christian faith encourage you to collaborate with your spouse? When you encounter conflicts in your relationship do you turn to God for help?

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John Bosio is a parishioner of St. Stephen Catholic Community in Old Hickory Tennessee. He is a global human resources manager for Caterpillar Financial Services Corp. and an adjunct professor at Aquinas College. He is the author of a newly released book: "Happy Together: The Catholic Blueprint for a Loving Marriage."