

## **Grow Up! It Might Save Your Marriage**

“Marriage is our last best chance to grow up.”

Many marriage problems are a direct result of immaturity. Think about it. An immature person has trouble accepting responsibility and thinks the whole world revolves around his or her desires. Immaturity can make marriage a miserable relationship. But two mature people can overcome many challenges and be mutually encouraged by their companionship.

Some people have immature understandings of marriage itself. These people want more from marriage than it delivers. Some naively think that *getting* married will lead to a life of unending happiness. But, as one family Therapist wrote, “Marriage is not supposed to make you happy. It is supposed to make you married” (Frank Pittman, *Grow Up! How taking Responsibility Can Make You a Happy Adult*).

Although marriage should be a mutually encouraging relationship, when we expect it to meet our need for personal happiness, we place unrealistic pressure on it. To expect another person to make you happy is asking more than most can deliver. Good marriages have happy times –but they also have times of difficulty and sadness.

If personal happiness is your main goal, it’s time to grow up. Happiness is a by-product of a life of maturity and good priorities. In a strange way, when personal happiness becomes our primary focus, it becomes elusive. Some people (and even counselors) consider it a counseling emergency when a person or married couple is not happy. But this response actually feeds discontentment and can lead people into obsessive dissatisfaction and even depression. Is it possible that the world was not designed to revolve around our felt needs? Happiness is discovered when people decide to be responsible and to focus on serving others more than themselves.

To experience satisfying companionship, we must think more maturely about marriage. Pittman wisely notes that, “Marriage is not about being in love. It is about the agreement to love one another. Love is an active, transitive verb. It is something married grown-ups do no matter how they feel. It is nice when married people are in love with one another, but if they are loving enough to one another, that magic may catch fire again.”

One of the greatest obstacles to maturity is the emphasis in our cultural on personal happiness as a fundamental right –if not a sign of true mental health. Don’t misunderstand. I am not suggesting we become stoic realists who are skeptical of pleasure and enjoyment. Instead, I am recommending that true and lasting pleasure comes from a refusal to treat personal felt needs as the highest priorities of life.

Life can be hard and discouraging. To enjoy it, we must be mature. We need to grow up! Selfishness is always listed as a primary reason marriages dissolve. But self-giving love enriches a marriage. Jesus set the supreme example of this love and the New Testament challenges us to follow that example: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4; see also II Corinthians 5:15).

A good marriage cannot be realized apart from a grown-up perspective from both husband and wife. Selfishness and childish tendencies must be conquered. When couples accept that marriage is not about being in love but an agreement to love; not about feeling loved but valuing each other, then they will find the path to a deeper, more mature and meaningful marriage. As an added benefit, the feelings often follow the choice to *be* loving.