

# *Back in Vogue: Marriage Tips From 1913*

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As I sat in the living room scanning the Daily Express newspaper of Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007, wearing my “family life spectacles” (as it were), the following article jumped out at me: *Back in Vogue: Marriage Tips from 1913*. These were bits of marriage counsel given before I was born. I just had to read on.

“Tips for a happy marriage published nearly a century ago look set to be a hit this year [2007]” begins the article by Jo Willey. Two books – *Don’ts for Husbands* and *Don’ts for Wives* – are expected to be bestsellers. The guide books penned in 1913 by Blanche Ebbutt are seen now as amusing and wise and relevant in 2007. They remind men not to complain about their wives’ cooking and warn wives never to utter the hated words: “I told you so.” The books originally remained in print for twenty years at a time when men worked and women stayed at home. Although times have changed since then, one tip that is still very relevant states: “Don’t increase the work of the house by leaving all your things in different places. If you are not a tidy person by nature, at least be thoughtful.” Ebbutt advises husbands: “Don’t talk down to your wife. She has as much intelligence as your colleague at the office; she lacks only opportunity. Talk to her (explaining when necessary) of anything you would talk of to a man, and you will be surprised to find how she expands.”

Willey tells wives not to flirt with other men, in case they succeed more than they intended. It is like playing with tigers and edged tools and volcanoes all in one. She also states something quite radical for its time: Women are reminded to try to make the best of the flawed, often ridiculous men they have married. For advice like that to be given was pretty new.

## **An Older Manual on Marriage**

There are some marriage tips we should consider which are even older—not just a century old, but thousands of years old. In fact, these tips are not just for marriages but for successful family living. Where can these tips be found? In an ancient manual we call the Scriptures, the Holy Bible.

**Manuals are important.** My car needed some much required attention. I knew that, if I had a mechanic’s manual, this was something that I could attend to and save some money. The local car mechanic’s per hour rates were exorbitant. So I went down to a local Ford dealership to purchase a standard or generic car manual. The Ford dealership could not understand why I should come to them when I drive a Citroën. “There is no such thing as standard car manual,” they said. “You are better off going to a Citroën dealer.” “After all,” they said, “They make the cars in the first place. So a Citroën manual is best for you.” Needless to say, they were right. Eventually, I got a Citroën manual and with its help I fixed my car.

Right now, all over the world, there are marriages, parents and families who are in need of the Bible manual to help do some necessary work on their relationships.

The manual, the Holy Bible, informs us that God made the first family. Everything was perfect for the first family. They had a beautiful home, good food, a wonderful loving relationship with each other and with their maker—God. What more could one ask for? Genesis 3 describes how the first family became dysfunctional.

However, the manual describes how, despite the dysfunction of every family since then, we all have something in common. This is highlighted by the Scripture passage for today found in Matthew 7:24-27. Having read this well known story you might be thinking, what has this passage got to do with family life?

Matthew 7:24-27 is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He is not only addressing His newly appointed and ordained disciples, but those who have followed Him wishing to hear His words of wisdom. Men and women, boys and girls, peasants and fishermen, even those who wanted to bring back bad reports about Jesus and who only wanted His downfall were present. Jesus spoke of a kingdom to which all could belong. His kingdom is not for the future but for the present. Jesus wants to establish His kingdom in the hearts of human beings, permeating their lives by His Spirit, and overflowing into other people's hearts and lives with dynamic power, the compelling power of love.

Whilst He outlined the privileges and responsibilities of being a citizen of the kingdom of love toward the end of His sermon on the mountain, Jesus made a call to decisive action. In verse 24 He states that it is unwise to listen but not to act. Hearing inevitably brings with it responsibility for corresponding action. Reading the passage with my family life spectacles on gives me a new perspective on the characters in the passage and what they have in common with every married couple, every family today.

### **Everyone Engaged in Building**

What the two men in Matthew 7:24-27 have in common is that they are both building—building a shelter to keep them warm or shield them from the hot midday sun.

When couples contemplate marriage and embark on premarital preparation, they begin to build. In fact, I believe every couple in the world in every faith group is seeking to build for a happy, loving and lasting relationship. I believe that every couple who walks up the aisle and says, "I do," is hoping that their relationship will be filled with joy and happiness. Generally, couples are not only looking at building a physical home environment for themselves to enjoy, but one in which children can be born, nurtured, trained and surrounded by an aura of love.

Here are some building blocks you can use as you build your home. They are basic essentials which must be allowed to permeate all relationships in the home.

- *Love* - This can be the most rugged of the building blocks listed here (John 3:34, 35; Gal. 5:13).
- *Trust* - This can be the most fragile.
- *Understanding* - This one can take the longest to develop.
- *Honor & respect* - These are probably the most neglected (Rom. 12:10).

- *Commitment* - This is undoubtedly the most determined.

It is impossible to have a good relationship with someone whom you do not love, trust, understand, honour and respect and to whom you are committed. If people in a relationship lose their love, trust, understanding and honour and respect for each other and their commitment to each other, the relationship will wither and die. Similarly, it is impossible for someone who is unloved, mistrusted, misunderstood, dishonoured and shorn of their self-respect to relate well to other people let alone make a commitment to commit to a relationship (Marshall, 1991).

### **Builders Choose Their Foundations**

Both men in Jesus' parable were fine until it came to the choice of foundations. In our marriages we have a choice of foundations. In parenting we have a choice of foundations. We can choose our foundations based on examples given us from the media, film and pop stars, or from the popular television serials. We can attempt to build solid marriages on premarital sexual encounters or extramarital relationships which the world seems to deem as acceptable. We can allow the values of the streets, of TV or our peers' values with their not-so-subtle pressure to be the foundations on which we allow our children to be brought up. Or we can build our lives on godly values. Some couples who are getting married believe that money and good looks form a good foundation for marriage.

**The best foundation for a happy marriage is not money.** If only we could suddenly come into a good substantial inheritance we'd be happy! No, you wouldn't. You would have the choice of which misery you experience, but you wouldn't be happy. If money was a good basis for marriage, you would expect that millionaires and those who have come into money unexpectedly—through inheritance or the lottery, for example, would have the best marriages of all. But they seem not to. In general, couples have to work and earn in order to keep going. The single-minded pursuit of money costs too much, and one of the prices to be paid is trouble in marriage. Don't, however, be selfish with what you both have. "My wife is always asking for money," a man complained to his friend. "Last week she wanted three hundred dollars. The day before yesterday she asked me for a hundred and fifty. This morning she wanted two hundred bucks." That's crazy," said the friend. "What does she do with it all?" "I don't know," said the guy, "I never give her any." Get the point?

**The best foundation for a happy marriage is not good looks.** Well, everyone wants their partner to be attractive. The great church leader and preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, once advised young pastors to marry women full of grace *and* beauty — so that should they fall from grace they could still live with them. But if physical attraction by itself is the only thing that keeps you together, your relationship will not last long. If beauty was a good foundation for marriage, you'd expect that film stars and fashion models would have the best marriages of all. But they seem not to. By all means, take care of your appearance for your own sake and each other's. But don't give it undue importance. Do, however, pay each other compliments.

Kevin and Sarah, a young couple, were sitting out on a porch swing. Sarah asked, "Kevin, do you think my eyes are beautiful?" Kevin answered, "Yep." A few seconds later: "Kevin, do you think my hair is attractive?" Again Kevin answered, "Yep." A few more seconds later: "Would you say that I have a gorgeous figure?" Once again, Kevin answered, "Yep." "Oh, Kevin," she said, "You say the nicest things." You may have to work a little harder than Kevin on your compliments of each other.

However, many married couples I know believe that the values of God's word make for a stronger foundation. Here are some important elements that must be part of a good foundation for a marital relationship:

- Invite Jesus into your hearts personally and as the unseen Partner in your marriage.
- Make time for each other and have fun together.
- Keep talking with each other and keep listening to each other.
- Take note of the way your partner feels loved.
- Talk about your differences and pray together.
- Practice forgiveness.
- Honour your parents but do not be controlled by them.
- Do not neglect sexual intimacy. (Lee, 2000)

**All foundations will be tried.** Whilst both men used different materials for their foundations, what they both had in common was the fact that the foundations were tested. Winds blew and rain poured on both homes. There is not a home in this world that has not been affected by the dysfunctional breakdown of the first home in Eden. Every home experiences problems. Whether you consider yourself saint or sinner, poor or rich, high class or low class, every marriage and family will go through testing times. The winds of adversity blow on every relationship. The rain of discontent pours on every family. Even I, in my position as a Family Ministries director, recognise the fact that my family and my marriage are constantly under attack from many negative outside influences. I would be only fooling myself if I thought my Christian pedigree would exempt me from the problems that all relationships go through. Once you make a commitment to someone in a lifelong marital relationship, you will be targeted by the destroyer of all that is good, the enemy of God. No home, no family can escape the inevitable. There is hope, however, in that if you choose the right foundation, your home can experience the love of heaven instead of the sorrows of hell.

**Only one foundation will stand the test of time.** The man in the story who chose the wrong foundation found to his regret that he lost everything in the end. E. G. White states, "He who turns a deaf ear to the gospel builds on the shifting sand of self, upon his own efforts" (*Mount of Blessing*, p. 152). "He builds upon human theories and inventions" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 314). It is important that we choose that which will have long lasting influence and will prepare us for eternal life. As we build on the foundations we will surely succeed at this thing called marriage and family.

The Apostle Paul, in the well known and well loved passage of 1Corinthians 13, gives what is for me the best foundation for families. It will withstand anything that is hurled at it. It is:

- Love that is rich in the human resources you pour into it.
- Love that has a wealth of generosity between you as a couple (I don't just mean bunches of flowers and boxes of chocolates, but generosity of judgement).
- Love that is full of forgiving and thanksgiving.
- Love that is overflowing with concern and care.

These foundation values that Paul talks about are seen also in the life of Jesus—the very heart of Christian belief. These are the things which do make for a happy marriage and a happy home. This foundation can make a relationship rich and beautiful.

I have made many visits to the homes of families. Often, as you enter a house you can see that a fortune has been spent on it. It has all the latest and best household and audio visual equipment, beautiful furniture and interior design and décor. And yet, there's an edgy feel to the place. Brittle, uncomfortable, it's a house, but not a home. In other houses, where the furnishings are not so nice—the sofa's worn, the wood isn't as polished, and it's a bit untidy—you get the feeling that the people there have built up something between them. Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that nice houses cannot be nice homes. In every home there should be a nice tone, a warm atmosphere, a rich beauty in there somewhere between all the family members.

My wish, my hope, my prayer is that your marriage and your home will be surely and soundly based on good foundations. I pray that the relationship between each husband and wife will be of such a strong love and secure love that whatever the future years will bring, you will be an example of what a good and happy marriage can be and will create a home that the children will be glad to call home and others will be delighted to visit.

Let's tell the world that no matter how old the tips, how old the information, for a good marriage, a good family, a good home—it all depends on the right foundation.

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