

“I cannot wait to be married,” she said naively as the wedding day approached. She longed for moving in with her spouse and beginning the journey of doing life together. Looking forward to breakfast in bed, fancy date nights, and lit candles with rose petals that decorated their home, she was completely unaware of what truly awaited her after she said: “I do.” Did she mean it? Will she stay committed? I did and still do.

Recently, I discovered a quote that summarizes marriage (which I could not put into better words).

“In marriage, there is no place to run, no place to hide. Through the spotlight of marriage, our true self is revealed. We are exposed for who we really are, warts and all. It is this feeling of always being watched, having dark areas revealed; having one to be accountable to, which makes marriage so very uncomfortable at times. What is hard about marriage is what is hard about facing the Christian God. It is the strain of living continually in the light of conscience other than our own being; under the scrutiny of another pair of eyes, accountability is at the very heart of marriage, as of Christianity.” (M. Mason)

It paints a detailed picture of what is to be discovered after the blissful wedding way.

As I read *A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* by Bryan et. al, I found this book to be very informative. The majority of couples, myself included, will enter into marriage hoping to receive their happily ever after, like a Disney movie. What they may fail to realize, just like in many of those movies, there can be trials, tribulations, tragedies, and triumphs. However, if the couples are committed to managing their expectations, working on their communication, creating ways to resolve their conflicts, validating their

partner, and focusing on progression instead of perfection, the couple will likely thrive and go on to have a fulfilling marriage. I found these components to be profound and personally significant. It has revealed my strengths and uncovered areas that need improvement. As a future LMFT, these are vital elements to a relationship, which I hope to share with my clients. I believe it would be beneficial towards allowing a healthy relationship to exist.

In regards to having expectations in marriages, we all do, even though there are no two marriages identical. Whether they are acknowledged or unspoken, realistic or unrealistic, people will generally know what they want out of their relationship. From the ideas of grandiose wedding plans to luxurious vacations, the reality is if expectations go unmanaged, they can ruin a perfectly good relationship. As discussed in *A Lasting Promise*, one of the pressing issues many couples face today is that people have grown to expect more than possible from their mates. This is not to discourage individuals from setting goals, but the burden of not meeting their goals has become impractical and unbearable.

A friend of mine shared with me some of the frustrations she experienced in her marriage. As I reflected, I remember thinking to myself she sounded so unhappy. I knew that I wanted to experience better in my marriage. She explained to me that her hurt was the result of setting unrealistic expectations. And these were her greatest moments of unhappiness at the time. I imagine that the majority of contentions and strife in relationships are due to unmet expectations. I am inspired and prompted to manage my perceptions to avoid falling into a disappointment. I choose not to let my expectations dictate my partner's love or commitment towards me.

Communication I describe as what blood is to the body, what Jesus is to his church, and what food is to the hungry. It is life-giving, essential to being healthy. Without it, I cannot

foresee how someone can function healthily. It is an expression that allows the exchange of information to help provide a clearer understanding. All too often people suffer from poor communication. Words are misconstrued or misinterpreted and taken out of context. Further, it can create conflict, therefore, escalating negative emotions.

Before marriage, I believed that communicating with my spouse would be an area of strength, considering I am forthcoming with expressing my thoughts and feelings. I say what I mean and mean what I say. Some would refer to it as the "gift of gab." I assumed communication would only consist of verbal transactions. I did not take into consideration that body language, facial expressions, or even silence was a form of communication. Poor communication skills can be very detrimental to a relationship. "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." (Proverbs 12:18)

Learning to use constructive methods and find applicable ways to handle disagreements is powerful in protecting the unity that marriage holds. I am inspired to work on bettering the way I achieve this goal. Although most of communicating involves speaking, listening is equally important. I am reminded of James 1:19 which states, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." To improve in this area, the ability to be expressive, openly, honestly, clearly, consistently, without demand, and with great accountability is fundamental.

In my younger days, I presumed that conflict in marriage indicated that a relationship was defective. With certainty, I believed that if a couple argued regularly, it would lead to their destruction and result in divorce. Now, I realize that fighting fair and conflict resolution is vital to maintaining the health and stability of a marriage. Needless to say, I think this idea is profound. Although it is almost a given that there will be many struggles in marriage, it is

encouraging to know that it does not equate to signs of failure. Rather, this is an opportunity to learn, grow, and evolve.

It can be discouraging when a fight takes place between spouses. They may be left feeling hurt, invalidated, and disappointed. I find at times that I might tend to withdraw, cast blame, or project my emotions; all of which can be damaging to the relationship. I challenge myself to improve in this area by dying to self, showing mercy, practicing forgiveness, and praying more. Conflict resolution ensures that there is a safe place for both of us to fail. We are all fallible creatures, so it's a given that we will fall short. If we hold ourselves to a standard of grace there is hope available for all.

It is likely that choosing battles wisely will spare future grievances. Resolving issues well can dissuade an individual from harboring resentment. Managing anger and choosing to respond and not react may help emotions from further escalating. If it does, calling a time-out can assist in de-escalating the situation. Although "time-outs" can seem rather juvenile, I see no harm in employing it to help reduce tension. The acknowledgment of one's wrongdoings shows self-responsibility and maturity in some cases. These are great ways not to look at your cares solely, but to consider the interest of others. (Philippians 2:4)

A point made in *A Lasting Promise* that stood out to me was the value of validating my significant other. I underestimated how important it was to ensure that my spouse felt validated. The support or lack thereof can gradually affect emotions, thoughts, and behavior. I struggled with this idea because I guessed it meant I had to agree with the other person's view. Validation can diminish hostility, decrease intense moments, and provide affirmation. I know that affirming my spouse ensures he knows that I am listening with the intent to understand him. When a person feels heard and their opinion matters, there is a level of appreciation that elevates.

Knowing that verbal and nonverbal validation is very significant, I am determined to make it a point to be intentional in my relationship. Enhancing my listening skills, choosing my words carefully, and responding in a tolerant way will show that I recognize his desire to feel valued. People must know that their contributions to the relationship have not gone unnoticed. Being a cheerleader to my spouse as well as applauding improvements made can stimulate a desire to want to contribute more. And because of this the affections and respect they have for their mate may grow.

The most promising viewpoint of them all was the reminder that perfection is not the goal in marriage, progression is. Like it says in *A Lasting Promise*, “the goal is to have a love that is growing to be more than it already is.” For those that are self-proclaimed recovering perfectionists such as me, this is great news. It can be quite unrealistic to expect that things will be without flaw and error. But there is peace in knowing whatever may come; I can maintain a hopeful outlook, especially in marriage. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.” There is comfort in knowing that I can turn to God no matter what, and I should not rely on my strength to be successful in relationships.