

While “love” is something many people think they fall into, studies show that divorce is something we usually grow into.

William Doherty, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, provides an insightful distinction between what he calls “hard reasons” and “soft reasons” that split couples up and lead to divorce. In Doherty’s view, “hard reasons” include “chronic affairs, chemical dependency, and gambling” in which “The person is not willing to change. They have a drinking problem and won’t get it fixed. They’re gambling the family money away and won’t get help.” “Soft reasons” include “general unhappiness and dissatisfaction, such as growing apart and not communicating.” (USA Today, Sept. 29, 2011, pt. 1-2D.)

Doherty found that most marriages aren’t destroyed by “hard reasons” but rather by “soft” ones. In Doherty’s study, the number one reason couples gave for getting a divorce was “growing apart,” followed by “unable to talk together,” “how spouse handles money, “spouse’s personal problems,” and “not getting enough attention.” I’m not sure how Doherty defines “spouse’s personal problems,” but at first glance, none of the top five reasons given are biblical excuses for ending a marriage. It’s not until number six that “infidelity” is mentioned.

What this study highlights is that even when marital satisfaction reaches a crisis point, the problem isn’t the marriage, but our lack of skills. Quite frankly, on a relational and spiritual level, most of us are seriously under qualified to enter marriage. We soon find that we’re in “over our heads” and feel like we’re drowning. Marriage all but demands that we grow, and a lot of us either resent the implication that we need to grow or are too lazy to work towards personal growth.

When “soft issues” are the problem, divorce is a very ineffective shortcut. Instead of finding a new spouse, we need to learn new ways to express empathy. Instead of getting a divorce, we need to get rid of laziness. Instead of searching for a new partner, we need to search for ways we can stay connected. If you don’t address the lack of relational skills that caused the first marriage to fail, the second one will, too—because, again, the problem isn’t who you chose to marry; the problem is who you’re becoming (and what you’re not becoming) in the marriage.

The USA Today article also quotes Susan Heitler, a clinical psychologist who notes that marriage is a “very high-skilled activity. If your marriage is failing, make the assumption your skill set is insufficient.”

You see, our assumption is all too often that our spouse is insufficient; therefore, the only logical solution is to get a new spouse. If we assume that our skill set is insufficient, that there are things we need to learn about not becoming lazy in our relationship, practicing empathy, growing in humility, generosity and gratefulness, then we’ll see marital dissatisfaction as a call to grow deeper in holiness rather than a call to dissolve our family.

I've said it before: most couples don't fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance. Persistent character weaknesses—laziness, arrogance, pride, selfishness, bitterness, a sense of entitlement, and so on—kill far more marriages than active affairs, chemical dependency or abandonment. The answer isn't pursuing "happiness;" it's pursuing holiness. By God's grace, we can grow in each of these areas. Dr. Heitler suggests that if both parties "will each take personal responsibility and focus on their own skills upgrade, the whole picture turns around. Even one person can turn the marriage around."

Doesn't this make sense? What if we assumed marital dissatisfaction is usually an issue of character, not mismatching, and thus began working on ourselves instead of getting rid of our spouse and trying to find a new one? What if, indeed, we found marriage as a call to holiness more than happiness, and then discovered that in the pursuit of holiness we actually achieved a level of happiness we never thought possible?

Hmmm. Somebody ought to write a book about this...

Gary Thomas