When my sister got engaged years ago, she made an observation that I've since realized is very true.

“So many people are negative about marriage,” she said. “When I say I’m engaged, they want to tell me how terrible it is.”

Now, I know marriage is hard. I understand there’s a vast difference in the mindset of a new bride and a couple celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. I’m aware that some people have a reason to be down on marriage because their spouse put them through the wringer and when their marriage ended it was a blessing.

But oftentimes, the negative mindset premi- nent in our culture is caused by looking at marriage the wrong way. Magnifying the bad instead of the good. Listening to people complain about their spouse and deciding we should complain, too. Blaming our spouses for everything that goes wrong and unloading frustration on them because the promise of “till death do us part” makes us feel safe enough to do so.

What gets lost in all this negativity is the support and the understanding of how mar- riage — as the deepest, most intimate relation- ship possible with another human — is meant to draw us closer to God. How marriage is a vehicle to discover not only earthly joy, but also heavenly joy, a taste of what’s to come. How the real goal is to help each other become better people and grow into God’s image.

The most helpful marriage advice I’ve ever heard, in fact, came during a church service two years ago. During a liturgy, a priest said: “The purpose of marriage is to help each other get to heaven. The reason marriage doesn’t exist in heaven is because you don’t need it once you’re there.”

Wow. If only someone had told me that when I was young bride who thought it was my hus- band’s job to keep me happy (because frankly, he’s great at that). If only I’d thought more about our salvation and less about my wants, I could have asked myself all along whether my words and actions might help or hinder my hus- band’s spiritual journey.

At the heart of every marriage are two sin- ners. Each person has weaknesses and flaws. But each person also has strengths and talents. And when you pool your strengths together, you can help compensate for the weaknesses. You can help each other get to heaven. The reason marriage doesn’t exist in heaven is because you don’t need it once you’re there.

Kids definitely add stress to a marriage. Kids only funny to the two of you. Because in your pri- vate world, minor incidents become inside jokes that remain funny 20 years later. Other people won’t get them, and that’s the point. They’re only funny to the two of you.

It’s okay to argue, but don’t be hateful or mean. When you disagree, look for a com- promise. Meet in the middle or go with your partner’s opinion.

Let your husband’s love teach you about Christ’s love. When he says you’re beauti- ful without makeup, when he hears your big- gest secrets and loves you the same, when he goes to work every morning to provide for the family, when he looks up at the sky of you, when he holds you tight in bed at night because you’re crying over a bad day, this is how God reveals Himself through your marriage. Take the love your husband gives you, and share it back with him and others. This is how God’s kingdom grows.

Kids definitely add stress to a marriage. Kids also bring you closer together because you’re constantly bonding and marveling over the beautiful creatures you created. Like your spouse, God will use your children to reveal Himself. And through all these intimate rela- tionships, He seeks to make you a better per- son.

In short, there’s a major upside to marriage. But only with God at the center does it work. Only when marriage is used as God intends, as a means to heal, restore and redeem the two lives joined as one, can the benefits be realized. The purpose of marriage is to help each oth- er get to heaven. The reason marriage doesn’t exist in heaven is because you don’t need it once you’re there.”

When I reflect on these words, I want to be a better person and a better wife. I want heaven as much for my husband as I do myself.

And in that divine framework, I hear the neg- ativity of our culture drowned out by the call of God, a God who created the gift of marriage so we can bring our partner home with us, and spend eternity with the one who taught us how to love and be loved, how to know Christ and how to be like Christ to everyone we encounter.

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