



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

What's so great about marriage?

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 prominent 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 spiritual aspect, the understanding of how marriage — as the deepest, most intimate relationship 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 husband'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 husband's spiritual journey.

At the heart of every marriage are two sinners. 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 find a solidarity that isn't possible alone.

Still, it's easy to be skeptical of marriage. It's easy to listen to the naysayers and divorce rate that warn against it and wonder what's so great about marriage anyway.

I've been married 16 years, and while I still have a lot to learn, I see clearly why marriage exists. And if a bride-to-be asked for my advice, I'd tell her this:

- ▶ Marriage is awesome and so fun. But keep realistic expectations and know upfront that you'll have ups and downs. Expect some hard times, and they won't shock you. You'll work through them and emerge stronger on the other side.
- ▶ It's really cool when you react to someone's story, and they tell you, "That's *exactly* what your husband said!" After this happens four

or five times, you realize you're thinking with a common mind. You two have become one.

- ▶ Pray with your spouse. Read the Bible. Go to church and bow your heads before the Lord, humbly worshipping side-by-side. There are a 1,000 ways to build intimacy, but a spiritual connection makes every other connection deeper and richer. It's the glue that keeps you together.
- ▶ Get ready to laugh *a lot*. Because in your private 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 compromise. Meet in the middle or go with whomever holds a stronger opinion.
- ▶ Let your husband's love teach you about Christ's love. When he says you're beautiful without makeup, when he hears your biggest secrets and loves you the same, when he forgives you or shows grace, when he goes to work every morning to provide for the family, when he lights up at the sight 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 relationships, He seeks to make you a better person.

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 other 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 negativity 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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