

Title: **The Secret to a Successful Marriage**

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I don't make a habit of eavesdropping on others' conversations, but sometimes it is difficult not to overhear what others are saying in one's presence. While Debbie and I were on vacation recently, we were eating breakfast next to a couple of men and I was treated to some wisdom regarding marriage.

One of the two men was probably in his sixties, but the other was a man perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties. I don't think that they were well acquainted because the younger man was informing his breakfast partner about his life.

He was married, but it was his second marriage. The first marriage, he informed the older man, had not worked out. It was at that point that the older man began to offer the young man his opinions about marriage. Since I was seated at the very next table, I was also treated to his excursus on successful marriages.

"Most couples do alright as long as they just live together, but it seems that once they get that piece of paper [he meant a marriage license – asd], they start having problems." That may not be an exact quote since I didn't have a napkin to write it down, but that's pretty close! Marriage just ruins a good relationship, don't you know!

The older man wasn't done offering wisdom for life. He went on to say that marriages entered by young people just don't last. "Young people aren't mature enough to make that kind of decision." Once again, probably not an exact quote, but you get the picture and the younger man, vindicated by the opinion, didn't argue the point.

There are many people, apparently, who view a marriage license as a symbol of the "shackle" that the marriage relationship is considered. That opinion has been mitigated somewhat by the ease with which a divorce can be obtained in our society. Still, the decision by a man and woman to live together without getting married allows one or the other to simply abandon the relationship without all the inconvenience of lawyers, court orders, etc. that a divorce entails. The Bible, however, refers to this kind of relationship as "fornication" ("sexual immorality" – NKJV) and identifies it as a "work of the flesh" whose punishment is eternal damnation (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). When Paul wrote that each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband to avoid fornication, he implicitly argued that sexual relations outside of marriage are fornication (1 Corinthians 7:2).

There was some truth in the older man's comments about young people marrying, although his statement was an overgeneralization. The decision to marry is one that deserves serious thought because of the consequences of such a commitment. Ask any 19-year-old if s/he is mature enough to get married and many, perhaps most, will answer in the affirmative. Unfortunately, the truth is that many young people who "jump into marriage" truly are not mature enough to get married. They see marriage as a wonderfully romantic and relatively carefree adventure in which their partner will bring them blissful happiness. They don't understand that marriage involves challenges that will test their commitment to the relationship and specifically to their partner. Those who have been warned often assume that such trials only affect those who "don't love each other as we do." Ah, the arrogance of romantic passion!

As so many others have done, the older man linked failure in marriage to the wrong thing. I have already acknowledged that maturity is usually a function of age, but it is not age per se that determines if a marriage will last. I personally know a number of people married in their mid-to-late teens whose marriages have lasted 40 to 50 years or until the death of their spouse. Of course, that no more proves

that people who marry young are more likely to stay married than the propensity of young people today to divorce proves that youthful spouses are the reason for such divorces. Nevertheless, such cases of successful teenage marriages raise questions about whether age is really the most detrimental factor to broken marriages.

The secret to a successful marriage is not getting married at an older age. There are plenty of “more mature” people who marry and then divorce after a few years of married life. It is not the accumulation of wealth before getting married. Plenty of people who are wealthy before getting married still end their marriages with a divorce. It is certainly true that people who marry very young sometimes suffer through difficult financial times, but even such marriages often are successful.

The secret to a successful marriage is not really a “secret” at all! Those who are committed to their relationship with God and to a lifelong relationship with their spouse have successful marriages. “So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6b). Their commitment to God will help them fulfill their marital responsibilities and their commitment to the marriage relationship will carry them through difficult times. Even successful marriages pass through occasional difficulties, but they last because the marriage partners don’t look to divorce as an easy escape from uncomfortable situations.

Wealth, good looks, age – none of these things will guarantee a successful marriage. The “secret” is commitment. Even young people who get married can have successful marriages...if they carry through on the commitments that most made in traditional marriage vows.

Fortunately, Debbie didn’t hear all of this “wisdom” on marriage. She returned to our table after the marriage seminar was over and has yet to realize that our marriage was doomed from the start! We were married at a young age (she was 19 years old and I was 20 years old). Furthermore, we didn’t live together prior to getting married. Somehow, we have managed to stay married for 32 years despite these “setbacks” and I have no intention of informing her of the dismal prospects for our relationship.