PERPETUAL PROBLEMS: MAKING THEM WORK FOR YOU

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Seeing at-risk marriages saved and transformed is close to the heart of Southwest Counseling Associates. Too often, we hear of couples being told that their problems cannot be solved and they should, therefore, divorce. This perspective, however, fails to take into account the reality of how problems in marriage present themselves and how couples can both survive and thrive in spite of them.

A common reason a couple will cite for their divorce are “irreconcilable differences.” The rationalization follows that, because their relationship possesses areas of difference or conflict that are impossible to permanently solve, their marriage uniquely warrants dissolution. However, scientific study has indisputably demonstrated that the presence of irreconcilable differences, far from being unique, are the universal norm for marital relationships. In fact, the groundbreaking researcher, Dr. John Gottman, has proven that the majority of problems marriages face are what he terms “perpetual problems.” Unchanging differences in personality, dreams, temperament and extended family dynamics are just a few examples from a plethora of potential issues a couple may find themselves managing all the way from their first to final anniversary. Research has also shown that the determining factor in marital satisfaction is not based on whether these perpetual problems exist but, rather, a couple’s ability to cope with and adapt to their own unique set of them.

Evidence that perpetual problems exist in every marriage is consistent with sin’s infestation of all human relationships. Every marriage can identify one or more thorns that serve a similar function to that of the apostle Paul’s in II Corinthians 12. Despite the recurrent pain it can inflict and our sincere prayers that it be taken away, God often tells us instead that His grace is sufficient and His power is made perfect in our sustained weakness. Thankfully, we confess that, through Jesus Christ, no problem is beyond the peacemaking hand of God. However, the making of peace does not always mean the presence of a permanent solution. The insightful author of A Marriage After God’s Own Heart, David Clarke, asks and answers his question on the role of perpetual problems in marriage this way:

“Why did God make men and women so unbelievably different? The main reason is so that we would have to depend on Him. God wants to be at the center of every marriage, so He made the relationship so difficult that we have to keep Him there to make it work. That’s just like God, isn’t it? He makes sure that He is the answer to all of life’s problems.”

Couples need to know that having perpetual problems make them normal and that a God who is never without answers is always present and prepared to surround a couple’s thorns with His grace and peace. If a couple is willing to submit itself to the often challenging, and even at times painful, journey of accommodating to one another, God is willing and able to show the way.