

MAN IN THE MIRROR BIBLE STUDY  
FINISHING STRONG – GROWING OLD TOGETHER  
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This is the last in the series on the Husband in the Mirror, Session Number 12, and the subject this morning is going to be finishing strong. How do you finish strong?

The party will be over soon, the crape paper will be drooped down low, the party hats will be strewn all about the room, and all of your golfing buddies have moved over to Sun City to live in condominium pods and drive around on streets made for golf carts. There are only going to be two rocking chairs sitting side by side. The question is what can we be doing now to make sure that we make the investment so we will be happy then?

That's kind of what this session is all about, and I want to read to you from the movie about John Nash called *A Beautiful Mind*. At the very end of the movie, John Nash was mentally ill, but he also won a Nobel Prize. At the Nobel Prize ceremony where he was presented his award, he said, "I've made the most important discovery of my career, the most important discovery of my life. It is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reasons can be found." Then, looking at his wife who had stood by him through all of these episodes of mental illness, he said, "I'm only here tonight because of you. You are the reason I am. You are all my reasons. Thank you." I wept. What a beautiful, touching scene!

"After God, but before all others," the theme idea for this whole series, "After God but before all others, I will make my wife my top priority." I hope that is resonating with you. I hope that you already were a true believer in that concept or, if not, that you have become a true believer because true believers are the only ones who get passionate about the things to which they are committed.

I want to talk to you a little bit about marital satisfaction. We need a problem to solve. First of all, one problem in marital satisfaction is a story about my son and his new wife. When he was getting married last year, one of the women in our church hosted a lingerie shower, and she decided to ask a number of questions of both John, my son, and Christie, his then fiancée. One of the questions she asked both of them, "What do you think John is going to look forward to most on his wedding day?" She said, "To see me walking down the aisle." He said, "The hotel." Doesn't that kind of capture the essence of the differences between a man and a woman?

I always get permission from Patsy to use these stories, but this one I especially wanted to get permission to use because after dinner Patsy and I usually take about 20 minutes to have a daily conversation. I think it's very valuable to have a daily conversation. I can remember a monthly conversation sometimes with Patsy. Those were nice, too, but a daily conversation is really a connected conversation. We were talking and she said to me, "John has done a really good job of keeping up with all of his old friends through e-mail." I said, "Really, I didn't know that. When did he mention that?" "He didn't actually mention it, it's just a feeling I have." I am sure that my dear wife picked up some little cue somewhere that through women's intuition she had a general idea that this was probably true. "It's just a feeling I have." Can you imagine someone coming to you and saying, "Well, next year we need to budget \$143,000 for marketing on this." "Well, what's your logic on this?" "Oh, it's just a feeling I have." One of the obstacles to marital satisfaction is that men and women really do think very differently on so many things.

On your tables are half sheets with a chart that shows marital satisfaction for different phases of one's life. I have put that chart, with permission, in the book, *Second Half of the Man in the Mirror*. You will notice that during the years when you have children, marital satisfaction tends to go down. That makes sense. All the pressures, all the stress, then they turn 16 and things really get bad. Then they grow up and after you get to the empty nest stage of life, you'll notice, (at least on this chart, this is some sort of a longitudinal study so I think it's probably fairly realistic), that marital satisfaction goes up. In fact, you'll notice that a woman's marital satisfaction is never higher than when she is in the empty nest stage.

Now, this was not my experience. When we went empty nest in our 26<sup>th</sup> year, it was a very difficult year. I've mentioned this here before at some point in the past. But, basically, what I was doing, and I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but I was putting enormous pressure on Patsy to recover her youth. Yes, you've been there? Yes, you're doing this now? Yes, you know what I'm talking about at least. The problem was that I was watching her get older, while I still felt like I was 25. Still do feel like I'm 25.

We kid around at the office. We have a trans-generational leadership team at the office. How old are you Brett? "36" Brett is a vice-president at Man in the Mirror. He is 36 years old, and I can take this kid anytime I want. That's why I like younger executives because I am in control; I am in charge.

So, I was feeling young and virile, and I noticed that Patsy had turned middle age, so I was putting pressure her to do things to recover her youth. It's pretty hard to be satisfied with someone else when you're not really satisfied with yourself. So as I began to look inside myself and saw that the problems I was having were really problems with me, not with her.

I was talking to a man who is also 36 years old and is going through some marriage challenges. He's wondering if it's worth it to stay in the marriage. I asked him to describe the challenges he was going through, and let me just say in a general way, they were peccadillos, small things, irritations. If you've seen the movie, *About Schmidt*, the kinds of irritations that Jack Nicholson felt. He didn't like the way that his wife got the keys out of her purse and things like that. Really significant things! Little habits your spouse has begin to grate on you. Why is that? Because there's a double that's why. The point is that this young guy was not having a real significant problems with his wife, but he was just didn't feel like his wife really deeply cared about him. True or not, it doesn't make any difference. That's how he was feeling. He wanted to know if he should get another woman and start over and throw in the towel – Christian guy.

C.S. Lewis once said, "Every age has its own outlook. All contemporary writers share, to some extent, the contemporary outlook even those like myself who seem most opposed to it." Lewis was opposed to the outlook of his generation. "Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming, without question, a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely as opposed as two sides could be but, in fact, they were all the time secretly united. United with each other and against earlier and later ages by a great mass of common assumptions."

Why are so many men getting divorced today? Why are so many Christian men getting divorced today? Because the Christian men and the non-Christian men are united by a mass of common assumptions. At its worst, Sheehy, the female author of *Passages*, at its worst, this set of common assumptions is that you're going to have different spouses for different phases of your life. There's the wife you have kids with. You dump her, then there's the next wife. We might not actually think like that, but, honestly men, I find increasingly that the men we work with have at some level, they're not true believers, but they're not really disbelievers either. They haven't utterly rejected that thought. They have an idea floating in the back of their mind, we hear it all the time - if it's not working out you can start over. They don't really believe it, but they're playing with it. I have several thoughts that come into my mind to describe, none of which would probably be appropriate to say.

It's a huge barrier to marital satisfaction when you are playing around with this thought in the back of your mind, "I am going to try, I'll give it a shot, but if it doesn't work out, no problem. I can just get a divorce." This is a huge barrier to marital satisfaction. It is more important to be committed to the institution of marriage than it is to be committed to your wife. It is more important to be committed to the institution of marriage than it is to be committed to the woman you are sharing a bed with. I did not say that it is not important to be committed to your wife. It is critically important to be committed to your wife as a person, but what I am saying it is even more important to be committed to the institution of marriage because if you are only committed to the person more than you are the institution then what do you do during those inevitable periods in every marriage where you used to like each other very much? Where is the moral glue to hold you in place? It is more important to be committed to the institution of marriage even as important

as it is to be committed to your wife, your spouse, as a person, and it is even more important to be committed to the institution of marriage.

So I told this young guy. I said, "Look, this is what's going happen. You're going to divorce your wife, and you're going to find someone else, and you're going to get married, and two years later you're going to be just as miserable as you are now because the problem is not your wife, it is you." When he grabbed hold of this idea that marital sex is more blessed to give than to receive, when he grabbed hold that his marital satisfaction was not dependent on what he would be getting from his wife, when he understood that he was biting into a mass of common assumptions that are not biblical, he was able to cast those things off, to jettison those things, and begin working toward marital satisfaction.

Here's what I told him. "Give it two years." It's the two-year rule. If you are unhappy in your marriage at any time, give it two years. That's the rule. If you're not happy, give it two years. If you're not having marital satisfaction, apply the two-year rule because two years from now things will be very, very different. If you want to finish strong, give it two more years. If after two years from now you have a different problem, give it two more years. That problem will get taken care of, too. Marital satisfaction is all about understanding that we are different, understanding that we bought into a lot of common assumptions and, then be willing to buy into the idea that it is more blessed to give than receive. And when you have problems, give it a couple more years, things will work out.

One day a guy said to me as we were talking about this, "You know, as important as the institution of marriage is, I guess it's really important to pick the right mate, isn't it?" I said, "It is important to pick the right mate, but it's even more important to work with the mate you've picked." Make sense? Okay.

Now, let's look at the Scriptures and see what kinds of ideas are in the Scriptures to help us along. Today I am going to give you three verses that are kind of touch points, anchors, kind of ideas that you should be able to go back to from time to time when you are not experiencing the marital satisfaction that you would like to. These are pointers about the way to go.

Proverbs: Chapter 5, Verse 18. I love this passage. It is actually in the middle of a warning about adultery. It says, "May your fountain be blessed and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth." "...may you rejoice in the wife of your youth." It is more blessed to give. What do you give? You give rejoicing in the wife of your youth.

The big idea today, "It is more blessed to give than receive." You want to finish strong? "It is more blessed to give than receive." Jesus said that. Red letters in the Bible. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Give – rejoicing – "...rejoice in the wife of your youth."

I love this next verse. This is my favorite verse in Proverbs. "A loving doe, a graceful deer may her breasts satisfy you always." Talk about marital satisfaction. "Make her breasts satisfy you always." What a powerful image of marital satisfaction! Give rejoicing over this wife of your youth.

Now let's turn to Ecclesiastes: Chapter 9, Verse 9. This is on a really different subject but I was thinking the other day, the book of Ecclesiastes when you first read it, seems like it is a book of gloom. One of our men said he thinks Ecclesiastes ought to be the first book of the Bible. In our generation because of the mass of common assumptions we are dealing with, Ecclesiastes is a wonderful book to study over and over again. Here's what I would suggest. That a man ought to study the book of Ecclesiastes over and over again until the gloom turns to hope. This is an extremely hopeful book, but on the first reading, it looks like it is a book of gloom. It's not; it's exactly the opposite. It's a great book of hope. We'll pull the hope out of the gloom here.

"Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun – all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun." Enjoy life with your wife. It's toilsome. We do our work feeling the prick of thorns. There is a lot of futility in the world. The world has been ordered this way so we might turn to our great God. But God says in the midst of all this meaningless, "Enjoy your wife."

Do you guys want to know what to give? Give enjoyment. It says, "Enjoy your wife." You could see my enjoyment. I see that, but I'm saying, also, enjoy your wife. Build into her life. Enjoy your life with your wife by making her happy; not making you happy – making you both happy. But you know what I'm saying here. "It is more blessed to give than receive." Give your wife enjoyment in life. You thought you were a pretty good catch at one time, right? It's got to be a big deal for her to be able to spend her life with you.

A final verse. Let's look at Malachi: Chapter 2, Verse 13. What's the problem here? We have a grave problem that needs to be solved, men. "It is more blessed to give than it is receive." We are talking about giving enjoyment to your wife. "Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands." You've been to a meeting, right, where men have gone forward with great weeping, great tears of repentance, their lives are in shambles, they're coming apart, and nothing happens.

Verse 14: "You ask, 'Why?' It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant." We make a covenant when we marry. "Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking Godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth." "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Give what? Give faith, give covenant loyalty to your wife!

Well, what's the problem? The problem is very simple. It's very difficult to give something you don't have if you don't have enjoyment of life, if you don't have faith. It's very difficult to give away something you don't have. The most important application I think this morning is to make sure you understand how Christ's Gospel applies to you. To understand the indescribable delight that the Lord, Jesus Christ, takes in you, His unconditional love. The Gospel of grace and mercy that Christ loved you so much that He was willing to step down from his high rank and assume the lowly state of a human - a God man. And even though He was a completely perfect, innocent man, He was willing to make a sacrifice. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." He was willing to make a sacrifice for you so that you might come into His presence and that you might move out of that gloom and that darkness. You might be able to move over into the light and enjoy all the benefits and all the privileges of being part of God's family.

The Scriptures say, "Love your wife as Christ has loved the church. Love your wife as Christ has loved you. Love her as your own body," he said. It's difficult to do if you have not really, fully embraced Christ's Gospel. If you still think that the Gospel is about performance, and everything else in life is about performance, and in your work, certainly, how well you do is based upon your performance. But in the Kingdom of God, in Christ's Kingdom, the relationship we have with Him is not based upon our performance. It is not based upon how well we do, and we need to, men, bring that right back into our marriage relationship, and that our relationship with our wife should not be based upon performance.

Marital satisfaction? Well, I'll just tell you these Scriptures we've looked at this morning, "May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. May you rejoice, give her rejoicing, give her the enjoyment she deserves, give her faith, it is more blessed to give than to receive."

A couple of practical applications here this morning. I've probably heard this somewhere before but when I thought of it, I thought, "That's a neat thought, but I probably heard that somewhere else." I can't imagine that somebody else didn't say it. "Today is the yesterday of tomorrow." So, today the past will be determined, and when you set a goal, you are literally writing history in advance. As an application this morning, I would like to encourage you to set what would be to you a realistic goal. Maybe for the next couple of years to set a realistic goal for marriage. One suggested goal would be a daily conversation and a weekly date. How about that? That would be a pretty good goal – a daily conversation and a weekly date. My wife and I have been doing this for more than half of the time we've been married. We've had a daily conversation and a weekly date. It just keeps things very fresh. It keeps things very personal. She feels like I am giving to her. She feels marital satisfaction. I see her responding to me giving me back what I've

given her, and I'm enjoying that marital satisfaction. I have enjoyed her. I have rejoiced over her. I have kept faith with her, and now it is all coming back.

I suppose there is much more that could be said here. As we wind down this series, the two ideas that I most hope you will take away is, first of all, the idea we repeated at the beginning that the idea is, "After God but before all others, we will make our wives our top priority." The category of all these little tips and little suggestions, which may or may not be the right ones for you like setting a goal of a daily conversation and a weekly date, whatever it is, they all come into the category of the emotional bank account.

Walk away with those two ideas, and I will, as your Bible teacher, feel like it has been a good 12-week investment in your life. "That after God, but before all others, you would make your wife your top priority." And, secondly, "You would relate to your wife as her having an emotional bank account into which you are making deposits and from which you are making withdrawals." And that every contact you have with your wife, you are either making a deposit or making a withdrawal.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we all would ideally like to finish strong. But, Lord, even as I say that, I know there are some men, because of the strong influence of the mass of common assumptions in our culture, they're not really true believers that they should finish strong. In other words, Lord, somewhere noodling around here in the back of our brains is this other idea that "Hey, if it doesn't work out it will be okay." Lord, I pray that you would convict every man right now who is having that thought that it is not from you but straight from the world, straight from the devil, straight from the flesh. That is not Scriptural, but they would bring themselves in repentance under the authority of your Scripture and they would be committed to the institution of marriage.

If you resonate with what I just said about your own life and you don't have that firm, true belief, and you would like to repent of that and put your faith in God and His word, then let me invite you to do it silently right now. This is the commitment to truly believe that you need to finish strong. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

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