



You Never Marry the Right Person

How our culture misunderstands compatibility.

by Timothy J. Keller August 10, 2018

In generations past, there was far less talk about “compatibility” and finding the ideal soul-mate. Today we are looking for someone who accepts us as we are and fulfills our desires, and this creates an unrealistic set of expectations that frustrates both the searchers and the searched for.

In John Tierney’s classic humor article “Picky, Picky, Picky” he tries nobly to get us to laugh at the impossible situation our culture has put us in. He recounts many of the reasons his single friends told him they had given up on their recent relationships: “She mispronounced ‘Goethe.’”

“How could I take him seriously after seeing *The Road Less Traveled* on his bookshelf?”

“If she would just lose seven pounds.”

“Sure, he’s a partner, but it’s not a big firm. And he wears those short black socks.”

“Well, it started out great ... beautiful face, great body, nice smile. Everything was going fine—until she turned around.” He paused ominously and shook his head. “... She had dirty elbows.”

In other words, some people in our culture want too much out of a marriage partner. They do not see marriage as two flawed people coming together to create a space of

stability, love and consolation, a “haven in a heartless world,” as Christopher Lasch describes it. Rather, they are looking for someone who will accept them as they are, complement their abilities and fulfill their sexual and emotional desires. This will indeed require a woman who is “a novelist/astronaut with a background in fashion modeling,” and the equivalent in a man. A marriage based not on self-denial but on self-fulfillment will require a low- or no-maintenance partner who meets your needs while making almost no claims on you. Simply put—today people are asking far too much in the marriage partner.

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The Bible explains why the quest for compatibility seems to be so impossible. As a pastor I have spoken to thousands of couples, some working on marriage-seeking, some working on marriage-sustaining and some working on marriage-saving. I’ve heard them say over and over, “Love shouldn’t be this hard, it should come naturally.”

In response I always say something like: “Why believe that? Would someone who wants to play professional baseball say, ‘It shouldn’t be so hard to hit a fastball’? Would someone who wants to write the greatest American novel of her generation say, ‘It shouldn’t be hard to create believable characters and compelling narrative’?”

The understandable retort is: “But this is not baseball or literature. This is love. Love should just come naturally if two people are compatible, if they are truly soul-mates. “

The Christian answer to this is that no two people are compatible. Duke University Ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas has famously made this point:

Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become “whole” and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person.

We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary challenge of marriage is learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.

Hauerwas gives us the first reason that no two people are compatible for marriage, namely, that marriage profoundly changes us. But there is another reason. Any two people who enter into marriage are spiritually broken by sin, which among other things means to be self-centered—living life *incurvatus in se*. As author Denis de Rougemont said, “Why should neurotic, selfish, immature people suddenly become angels when

they fall in love ... ?” That is why a good marriage is more painfully hard to achieve than athletic or artistic prowess.

Raw, natural talent does not enable you to play baseball as a pro or write great literature without enduring discipline and enormous work. Why would it be easy to live lovingly and well with another human being in light of what is profoundly wrong within our human nature? Indeed, many people who have mastered athletics and art have failed miserably at marriage. So the biblical doctrine of sin explains why marriage—more than anything else that is good and important in this fallen world—is so painful and hard.

No false choices

The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the Gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The Gospel is—we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared to believe, and at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us.

Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God’s saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God’s mercy and grace.

The hard times of marriage drive us to experience more of this transforming love of God. But a good marriage will also be a place where we experience more of this kind of transforming love at a human level.

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