

Blessed are they...

What happened to us?

Married two years and parents of a very active one-year-old, Jim and Rose are tired, stressed out, and angry at each other. They are both working full time, and each has career aspirations. This evening Rose is in the living room folding the laundry and playing with their son, Charlie. Jim is in the garage working on his favorite hobby, his car. Rose wonders in silence, *What has happened to us? The wedding pictures are still on the coffee table and yet, how I feel today and how I felt in the early days of our marriage are like day and night. How did we end up feeling so distant?*

Marriage is like riding a canoe

Dr. William Doherty, PhD, author of the book *Take Back Your Marriage*,⁶ writes that getting married is like launching a trip on the Mississippi river with a canoe. You set out in Saint Paul, Minnesota,

6. William Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), p. 11.

and unless you paddle fast and together, the current takes you south to places you did not intend to visit.

After the wedding, if you rely solely on your instincts and feelings to keep your relationship going, your canoe drifts, pulled by the currents of daily activities. Unless you paddle together, you slowly and unintentionally drift apart. At the start of your journey, you find the novelty of married life enjoyable. Then, gradually, you begin to take each other for granted. Each wants to go in a different direction, do different things. When children are born, tending to their needs seems to take over your life. Conflicts arise that are not resolved. Negative feelings of frustration and anger are left to fester. The good feelings you had for each other slowly evaporate, your relationship gradually weakens, and, after so much drifting, one or both of you think about jumping ship. Unfortunately, this is the path taken by many couples. Recent research indicates that for many couples the bliss fades after three years, and the advent of children increases the tension and the stress in the family. Most divorces take place during the first seven years.

Our attitudes make a difference

Finding happiness on the marriage voyage requires learning to paddle together and moving forward in the same direction. However, most spouses find it difficult to agree on a common direction, much less to paddle as a team.

Paddling in synchrony requires a unique mind-set, a special attitude. Winston Churchill is quoted to have said, "Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference." Our attitudes represent our stance in life, what we believe about ourselves and about others. Our attitudes are manifested in the values we embrace, in how we think, in what we say, and, ultimately, in what we do. As such, our attitudes greatly affect the quality of the marital relationship and the willingness of partners to coordinate their efforts. Successful couples develop attitudes that

allow them to agree on a common direction for their life. They embrace a set of values that act as a compass on their journey. Their attitudes encourage them to put aside their individual self-interests in order to collaborate, to paddle together for the sake of the relationship.

The guidance from our Christian faith

Christian husbands and wives learn through the practice of their faith both the direction for their marriage voyage and the collaborative spirit needed to stay on course. They learn from the Christian tradition that their life together has a special meaning. It is a vocation. For them marriage is not a private affair between two people caught up in romantic infatuation. Christian spouses believe that their commitment to each other is a response to God's call to love him and to be a sacrament of his love to one another, to their family, and to their community. Their relationship is a journey toward God and toward each other that leads them to holiness and to happiness.

When you entered Christian marriage, you embraced Christ as your partner, teacher, and guide on your journey. He sits with you in your canoe, ready to help. In the chapters of this book, you will learn from Jesus the direction for your voyage and the loving attitudes that make it possible for you and your spouse to paddle together and make progress toward your destination.

The benefit of practicing our faith

Psychologists and marriage therapists write articles and books about the behaviors and skills that help couples grow in their relationship. However, in spite of all the good advice from the social sciences, couples continue to struggle and break up, and the divorce rate is still too high. Fortunately, couples of faith have at their disposal not only the behaviors and skills recommended by marriage experts but also the

guidance of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's grace.

Researchers are finding that spouses who pray and practice their religion are less likely to get sidetracked on their voyage and to divorce. Kenneth Pargamen and Annette Mahoney,⁷ professors of psychology at Bowling Green State University, are finding in their research that spouses that go to church regularly have a higher degree of marital satisfaction and commitment, as well as better communication and conflict resolution skills.

It may be that faith-practicing couples are more successful in their marriage because of the Christian attitudes they learn from Christ, which Paul summarizes for the Colossians: "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and...forgive each other" (3:12–13). These are Christ's attitudes, which he proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. As Peter exhorts us, "Arm yourselves also with the same intention [as Christ]... so as to live...by the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1–2).

The loving attitudes

John Paul II told the youth gathered in Toronto for the Seventeenth World Youth Day on July 25, 2002, that God created man and woman to be happy together, and the Sermon on the Mount is the map for our journey to such happiness.⁸

7. David Yonke, "Happy Marriage Begins at Church Door BGSU Study Reports," *Toledo Blade*, April 14, 2007.

8. John Paul II, *Papal Welcoming Ceremony, Seventeenth World Youth Day*, Toronto, July 25, 2002 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/july/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020725_wyd-address-youth_en.html).

"It is told in the Book of Genesis: God created man and woman in a paradise, Eden, because he wanted them to be happy... The 'Sermon on the Mount' marks out the map of this journey. The eight Beatitudes are the road signs that show the way."

At the start of his ministry, Jesus walked up a hill, and after he sat down, he began to teach his disciples and the crowd that had gathered by proclaiming:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
*Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*
*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*
*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*
*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.*
*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*
*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*
*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

- MATTHEW 5:3–10

Poverty in spirit, mourning, meekness, mercifulness, purity in heart, peacefulness, and righteousness are the loving attitudes that open our heart to God and to one another. They help us paddle together in our marriage. They help us find the joy that Jesus promised: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Happiness flows from holiness

Jesus gave us the Beatitudes, our loving attitudes,⁹ as the path to holiness. It is holiness that brings happiness. Holiness brings joy and contentment. As Saint Paul writes, "...for I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (Philippians 4:11). Benedict XVI reminds us that holiness is within reach to all of us. He writes, "Holiness does not consist in never having erred or sinned. Holiness," he adds, "increases the capacity for conversion, for repentance, for willingness to start again and, especially, for reconciliation and forgiveness."¹⁰

The marriage voyage is challenging and demanding. But Christ is present with us and through his grace helps us make progress on our journey in spite of our weaknesses and sinfulness.

The power of grace

Although researchers are finding that spouses who pray and practice their faith are more likely to stay together and have a higher degree of marital satisfaction, the daily life of the Christian couple is not easier than anyone else's. Misunderstandings, conflicts, disappointments, and other difficulties are inevitable in a couple's life.

9. John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Vatican City: August 6, 1993), #16.

"The Beatitudes are not specifically concerned with certain particular rules of behavior. Rather, they speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life."

Also: John Paul II, *Homily at the Mount of the Beatitudes*, March 2000 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000324_korazim-israel_en.html).

"Sinai and the Mount of the Beatitudes offer us the roadmap of our Christian life and a summary of our responsibilities to God and neighbor."

10. Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, January 31, 2007 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070131_en.html).

What helps Christian spouses to cope with their daily challenges and to overcome their human limitations and sinfulness is the effect of God's grace.

Blessed Pope John Paul II told us, "Jesus does not stand by and leave you alone to face the challenge. He is always with you to transform your weakness into strength. Trust him when he says: 'My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9)!"¹¹ When we put our trust in Christ's power and follow him, we grow in holiness and find happiness.

■ Where do I start?

In each chapter of this book, you will be asked to make a small change in your life that will take you closer to your goal of a more loving marriage. Consider the suggestions below, and do as many as you can.

- Commit to reading the chapters of this book.
- Commit five minutes each day to silently listen to God's voice. Identify a time and place where you can do so.
- Say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the gift that your spouse is to you.
- Ask yourself, "Are we drifting?" Reflect on this for a few minutes.
- Do something small that you know your spouse will appreciate.

11. John Paul II, *Homily at the Mount of the Beatitudes*, March 2000.

Jim and Rose and you

To stop their drifting, Jim and Rose needed to acknowledge that they were going in the wrong direction and turn to each other and to God for help. When you acknowledge your personal failings and turn to God and to each other for help, you are ready to hear God's voice and to receive his graces. God's grace gives you the courage to reset the course of your journey and to choose the direction that leads to him. It is through God's grace that you and your spouse help one another toward holiness; as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us, "By this grace they 'help one another to attain holiness.'"¹² God's grace and the spouses' openness to receive it are some of the reasons faith-practicing couples have a higher degree of marital satisfaction.

In the coming chapters, we will explore the loving attitudes for a happy marriage. These are drawn from Jesus' Beatitudes which, according to the *Catechism*, "shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life."¹³ We will ask: What does it mean for husband and wife to be poor in spirit, to be meek, and to mourn? We will explore how spouses hunger for righteousness, are merciful, have a clean heart, and become peacemakers, as Jesus commands. Finally, we will reflect on the threats to marriage present in our age and on what spouses are to do to inherit the kingdom.

12. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1641.

13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1717.

■ Prayer

*O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

*O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts...*

- PSALM 95:1-8

■ **QUESTIONS FOR A COUPLE'S PRIVATE REFLECTION**

- Is our marriage canoe moving in the right direction?
- Are we drifting?
- How good are we at paddling together?
- What causes us to get out of sync?
- What are our common dreams as a couple?
- How do we experience the effect of God's grace in our marriage?

■ **QUESTIONS FOR GROUP SHARING**

- What stood out for me or struck me in reading this chapter?
- In what situations do I feel that our life together is like an adventure in a canoe?
- How does my Christian faith encourage me to collaborate with my spouse?
- If God were to use a contemporary song to express his love for me, what song would he pick, and why?
- How often do I turn to God for help to resolve conflicts in our relationship?
- Can you think of a couple who models the loving attitudes expressed in the Beatitudes in their marriage?