

A Pre-Marriage Checklist

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by Dr. Clyde Narramore

It was a beautiful wedding—almost perfect. With gorgeous weather, an attractively decorated church, and heavenly music, the ceremony flowed smoothly. Megan, the bride, turned to her mother, and beamed, "Mom, wasn't it just wonderful?" And Mom agreed.

But as the weeks and months passed by, Megan began to realize that while her wedding was perfect, her marriage wasn't! In fact, she wondered why she and Michael hadn't seen some of their problems coming long before they decided to marry.

I'm always interested in how married people respond to the question, "How long after you married did you realize that you were going to have serious problems?" To my surprise many say, "On our wedding day!" I remember Keri, a woman in her thirties, saying, "As I was walking down the aisle, I realized we shouldn't be getting married. I knew I wasn't ready and I kept praying to God that when the pastor asked if there was anyone who had an objection, someone would stand up and say so. But no one did. So I went through with it, hoping things would get better. But they didn't. They became worse! Finally we divorced."

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When I asked Keith how long it took after the wedding to understand that he and his wife were in for some difficult days, he told me it was on the second day of their honeymoon.

"We were in our room in a nice hotel," he said, "when I looked up in time to see my bride throwing a flower vase at me. Fortunately, she was a bad shot! The vase missed my head, but it knocked out the window. I was stunned and asked, "What's wrong?" She told me I would never know. That's been 18 years ago and I still don't know why she threw that vase, let alone why she is upset with me about so many other things. And believe me, it's rough."

I don't know if Keith is so clueless that he doesn't realize the upsetting things he does to trigger his wife's anger, or if she is incredibly oversensitive and easily hurt. But in any case, they could have avoided much grief if they had worked out their problems before they married.

There's an old saying, "Marriage is a school in which the pupil learns too late." If we aren't ready for marriage or if we choose a poor marriage partner, this can be very true. Yet for most people, it doesn't have to be. To be sure that it isn't, we need to do three things. First, we need to be prepared to be a reasonably mature, emotionally healthy, and spiritually committed spouse. Second, we need to select a mate who is ready to be a reasonably mature, emotionally healthy, and spiritually committed spouse. And third, we need to be willing to face our needs to grow and become better people and well-adjusted marriage partners.

In this booklet we will look at eight areas that will critically impact your marriage. These eight areas can provide helpful guidance in determining whether you and your prospective mate are ready to make a lasting, lifetime commitment.

1. Personality Adjustment

Some people are quite well-adjusted, while others are not. The person who is lacking in good emotional or personality adjustment finds it difficult to live with himself and others. Most serious marriage problems arise because one or both partners have some long-standing problematic personality characteristics. Once we marry, these problems are even more likely to be triggered because of the new levels of intimacy, responsibility and give and take required in marriage. A description of a person who is emotionally well-adjusted would look something like this:

- Composed rather than highly anxious or nervous.
- Happy rather than depressed.

- Optimistic rather than negative and pessimistic.
- Realistic rather than unrealistic.
- Respectful rather than disrespectful.
- Able to communicate rather than hidden.
- Sympathetic and caring rather than unsympathetic.
- Sensitive to others rather than insensitive.
- Self aware and open rather than defensive.
- Objective rather than subjective.
- Flexible rather than rigid and controlled.
- Patient rather than impatient.
- Amiable rather than hostile.
- Humble rather than proud.
- Thoughtful rather than impulsive.
- Good self-esteem rather than low self-esteem.
- Honest and direct rather than manipulative.
- Open to others rather than closed and hidden.
- Secure rather than insecure.
- Assertive without being domineering or controlling.

Even the positive dimensions of each of these pairs can become a weakness if they are carried to an extreme. Take optimism, for example. This is a great trait, but it needs to be balanced with realism or it becomes denial. Or consider objectivity. While it is generally preferable to subjectivity, it must be balanced with emotional sensitivity, or it results in an impersonal, computerized approach to life. And patience is a great virtue, but some people are so "patient" they refuse to take a stand on anything! They're like a limp, overcooked carrot!

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Other characteristics are appealing during courtship but become problematic later. Take, for example, people who are rather subjective and impulsive. During courtship, this can be enjoyable and endearing. These people are spontaneous, emotionally responsive, and fun. They can bring new life to a serious, objective, deliberate dating partner. But after marriage, when it's time to plan ahead, do the budget, make long-range decisions, or take on the responsibilities of work or parenting, the negative side comes out. The same trait that once brought joy to the relationship starts to trigger anger and resentment. What the mate used to consider "spontaneity" is now called "impulsive" or "irresponsible." And the subjectivity that used to seem enjoyable is now considered irrational!

These personality traits show up in nearly everything a person does and thinks, especially after marriage!

When a person tends toward the negative side of several of these personality traits, living together can be like nestling against a porcupine.

Many couples considering engagement see a professional counselor and take personality tests before they make final plans to walk down the aisle to say "I do." Pre-marriage counseling and testing is a wonderful way to take a more objective look at your own and your prospective mate's personality traits. If you aren't able to do that, you may find it helpful to set aside time to discuss the traits and personality styles listed here. Rate yourself and your potential mate in each dimension from one to ten and ask him or her to do the same. Then discuss two or three dimensions at a time over a period of a few weeks. Talk about how your similarities and differences might impact your marriage. This will help you decide whether you should head to the altar, or, on the other hand, to a therapist!

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When you identify some personality traits that may be problematic, consider several options. You might (1) slow down the relationship, (2) spend lots of time discussing and working through the potential conflict areas, (3) seek professional counseling, or (4) terminate the relationship. But remember this: Marriage won't solve your potential problems and "hoping" won't make them go away. Take a close look before you leap. The Bible says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge but the simple keep going and suffer for it."¹

2. Life Goals

One evening when Jason and Alena were dating she looked sweetly at him and asked, "What is your biggest goal in life, Jason?"

To her surprise Jason answered without hesitation, "I want to make a million bucks as fast as I can, then retire and live off the interest."

Alena laughed. "No, seriously, what are your long-term goals?"

Jason wiped the smile from his face and assured her that he had meant what he said. "I want some fun out of life. I don't want to get so involved in making a living that there's no time for pleasure."

For several weeks Alena turned this and several other things Jason told her over in her mind. She really liked him and enjoyed spending time together. But she was concerned about Jason's lack of more meaningful goals and purposes in life. In time, she decided Jason was not the person she wanted for a husband.

Having compatible goals and understanding each other's plans for the future is vital for a happy marriage. Goals affect every area of our lives. They involve having children (yes, no, and how many), our education, where we choose to live, our decision to reach out to help people, our spiritual interests, and a host of other factors. Like two front wheels of a car, the more a couple can have similar goals and head in the same direction, the more likely they are to run a straight course in their marriage.

3. Intellectual and Cultural Interests

Another question to consider before marriage is, "How compatible are we in terms of our intellectual and cultural interests? In the first blush of emotional love some couples give little thought to the importance their broad, long-term interests play in producing a happy marriage.

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When Alan became interested in a possible life-relationship with Donna, one thing he especially enjoyed was her love of the arts, poetry, and literature. He was stimulated by sharing visits to museums, reading great books, attending plays, and reading poetry. Neither Alan nor Donna cared much for sports but they loved the arts.

Heather and John loved sports and all sorts of outdoor activities. After they married they spent countless weekends at football games, car races, hiking, and camping. They would have been bored stiff by visiting museums and reading books.

Both of these couples enriched their marriages through shared recreational interests. This doesn't mean that couples with different interests can't enjoy and enrich each other. They can. But common interests help build togetherness. We need to share in our recreational, vocational, and spiritual lives.

4. Education

Another major consideration is education. One of the fastest ways for a person to change his or her economic status is to obtain a good education. Education is not only a sharpener of our abilities, it is also a key to many doors that otherwise would be closed. Other things being equal, the person with an adequate education is more able to accept responsible positions in

the workplace. But the impact of education on marriage goes far beyond jobs and finances. Couples that share a desire to learn and grow can challenge and enrich each other.

This, of course, does not require a college degree. Simply warming a bench in college for four years or longer doesn't make you an open-minded, growing person! In fact, many people with little formal education are extremely wise and growing and knowledgeable. The Apostle Paul, for example, urged older men and women to teach the younger generation how to be self-controlled, and good spouses and parents.² These things are difficult to learn in college. In many ways, life is the best teacher. Just be sure that both you and your prospective mate are willing to be taught!

Jean was an intelligent, talented, ambitious young woman who fell in love with Greg, a handsome young man she met at church. When Greg dropped out of school to take a job with little or no future, Jean was sure she could "fire" him with the ambition he lacked after they were married. So they tied the knot.

After several children were born and after many frustrating experiences, Greg did attempt to further his education, but he just wasn't motivated. Unfortunately, it wasn't simply Greg's lack of a formal education that frustrated Jean. She found that Greg wasn't interested in most of life. He didn't care about getting ahead at work.

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He didn't want to be involved in church. He didn't care about politics. And he didn't want to spend time with mutual friends. When he wasn't at work he just sat around, watched TV, or slept. That wasn't at all the way Jean had planned to spend her married life. There are all too many marriages where unhappiness and divorce become the unfortunate fruits of an inadequate motivation to grow and learn.

5. Vocation

How would you feel about spending the rest of your life with a young idealist not interested in accumulating any material things, including a home to live in? Jim is content surfing the net, listening to music, and working part-time at a local business. His relaxed lifestyle initially appealed to Christine, and so did Jim. He wasn't driven and overly invested in his work like her dad had been while she was growing up. However, after they had been married a few years, Christine began to mature while Jim remained content as he was. They became more and more incompatible, and eventually both wished they'd never married.

Consider how many ways your job will impact your marriage:

- Your job, and your spouse's job will occupy about one-third of your lives. If you aren't happy there, you probably won't be happy at home either!
- Your job, and your spouse's, will determine your income, which in turn will determine the type of home and neighborhood you live in, your choice of vacations, your clothing budget, your eating-out budget, the school your children will attend, and on and on.
- If a job takes the spouse from home often or for long periods at a time, it is difficult to build intimacy, and the other spouse may have to assume more than his or her share of responsibilities.
- If employment is seasonal or irregular or paid on commission, your family finances will have to be planned accordingly.
- Stability in your family life can be impacted by your vocation. Some companies require that employees move from place to place every few years if they want to move up the corporate ladder.
- Certain occupations may place heavy social obligations upon the spouse.

These and other factors should be thought through as you consider selecting a life's mate. They do count toward happiness or unhappiness. Anyone who says, "I'm marrying him, not his job," should spend some serious time reflecting on the ramifications of one's vocation. In a real sense, you do marry your mate's daily work—and your own!

And what about two career marriages? Have you talked through the implications of a two-career marriage on your free time, your time together, your children, your roles at work and home, and your level of family stress and pressure? Two career marriages may work beautifully, but it's important to think through the implications as thoroughly as possible ahead of time.

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And what about this situation? As a young woman, you have vocational aspirations. But your prospective husband wants to marry a wife and homemaker. Would it be wise for you to give up your vocational goals? Can he guarantee that he will always be around to provide for his "homemaker"? Unfortunately, he cannot. Plus, you may want the emotional satisfaction of a career or the security of a credential.

Mary's problem was different. One of five children in a home where there was never enough income, she had decided she would be a working wife and earn enough money for some conveniences. But as time went on, she began to wish her husband would increase his earning capacity. She wanted to spend more time at home. But she had never thought to look for such personal qualities in her boyfriend before she became his wife. Now when she brings up her desire for more money or more time at home, her husband becomes resentful and accuses her of nagging.

If you want to avoid these scenarios, discuss your vocational plans before the organist plays, "Here Comes The Bride."

6. Family Involvement

About six months before my wife and I were married, an older man, a family friend, gave me some good advice. "Clyde," he said, "when you get married you're going to have three families." I sort of blinked, wondering what he meant. "There will be," he continued, "you and Ruth. But you'll also have Ruth's family, and, of course, your own parents and brothers and sister. All three will be important." Then he went on to say that we should try to become well acquainted with each other's families, develop good relationships, and work together as a team.

How wise he was. And how true it became. We ended up living next door to my father and mother-in-law for many years. They were incredibly helpful and supportive and poured so many wonderful things into our children's lives. And when Ruth's parents aged, we took the major responsibility for their care.

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Not long ago I was counseling with a couple who were considering marriage. When I asked the prospective groom how he was relating to his prospective bride's family, he said, "I'm not marrying them. I'm just marrying Stephanie. Her folks can do whatever they please. If they don't bother us, we won't bother them."

This sounded good to him, but it really didn't make sense, because our extended family does "bother us," or help us, or encourage us in our efforts to build our own growing family! Even if your relatives live a thousand miles away, they will influence your marriage. Their physical absence may keep you out of open conflict, but if nothing else, it may deprive your children of

their grandparents. And even if you seldom speak, the pattern of relating which your prospective spouse learned in his or her own family system will influence the way she reacts in yours. And what about the holidays? Will your mate want to spend Christmas with her relatives? Will you alternate holidays between families? Will you follow your spouse's traditions for celebrating birthday and holidays, or yours? Or will you establish new ones?

Before marriage, be sure you get a reading on how you understand each other's families. Some prospective brides and grooms have faced neither the realities of family involvement before marriage nor the impact their childhood family experiences will have on their own marriage. How much better to consider these matters before wedding bells ring, rather than later when conflicts have arisen.

7. Friends

Another area to check out is your compatibility with friends.

You've heard the saying, "You can tell a lot about a person by the company he keeps." How true! What our friends enjoy, we tend to enjoy. What interests our friends tend to be what interests us. What our friends don't care for is most likely what we don't care for. And our friends' level of spiritual interest and commitment is probably similar to our own. Otherwise, why would we be spending time with them? Don't expect you or your potential mate's friends to change radically after you've said your vows.

And how about your level of social interests? What if you are outgoing and enjoy many friends, and your potential spouse is more of a loner? If you marry, will you both be able to adapt and compromise, or will this become a source of continual frustration?

Does your potential mate's lack of interest in spending time with friends reflect a dislike of people? Is it just his (or her) reserved nature? Does it reflect basic insecurity? Is it a sign of preoccupation with oneself? And for your part, does your gregarious style reflect an inability to be alone and enjoy solitude? Will you try to change your partner or accuse him of being antisocial if he isn't as outgoing as you?

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The answers to these questions should give you clues as to what life might be like if you were married to each other 24 hours a day!

8. Spiritual Interests

The first verse in the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."³ Then it goes on to say that God created human beings—Adam and Eve—and the family. Marriage was God's idea. He knew that it could be a wonderful place for companionship, love, nurture, teamwork, and growth! But families can also bring great sorrow, and potentials can turn into problems if we don't build our family relationships around our Creator's design.

Since God has created us, who knows better than He how we can function best? It is a wonderful experience to share marriage with a partner who also wants to build his or her marriage with God at the center. This spiritual dimension of life is so important that the Bible says we should never marry someone who does not share this spiritual commitment. "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?"⁴ Unless the two are headed in the same direction spiritually, chances are they will be going in opposite directions in many other areas of life.

The Bible also says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And lean not to your own understanding—in all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths."⁵ When two people are committed to Christ, they will both be looking for His direction. And since they will both be seeking God's leading, they will have the potential for much greater unity and depth of sharing.

Our spiritual interests and commitments impact our horizontal relationships as well as our relationship with God. Our spirituality shapes our entire worldview. It influences the way we choose to invest our time. It impacts our resilience in times of crises, the friends we choose, our work, and our leisure time. It is a blessing to marry a person who is a committed Christian, then grow together spiritually through the years. The enrichment He will bring into your marriage can never be fathomed. And the guidance, comfort, and support God gives you through the years, including the difficult experiences of life is beyond comprehension.

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Consequently, it is of utmost importance if you are thinking of hearing wedding bells ring, to be devoted to Christ yourself; then make sure your intended mate is also dedicated to the Lord.

Looking Ahead

No one can be a perfect mate and no one can choose a perfect mate. God created marriage to help us mature and grow and He knows every couple will have their share of struggles. But it is tremendously important that we are aware of as many of our areas of compatibility and incompatibility before marriage. And when the potential problems are clearly too great to enable a couple to build a fulfilling, enjoyable, long life together, we need to wait until God leads us to a compatible mate.

1. Proverbs 27:12.
2. Titus 2.
3. Genesis 1:1.
4. 2 Corinthians 6:14.
5. Proverbs 3:5, 6.

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