

Proverbs & Marriage

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I would like to spend my time with you explaining two proverbs— one from the poet Petrarch, the other from the Greek sage Hesiod. I will begin by reading both proverbs, but it will take me a little while to return to them.

The first proverb is from Petrarch, and it is: *He who can say how much he loves, loves but little.*

The second proverb is from Hesiod, and it is: *At the beginning of the cask and at the end take thy fill, but be saving in the middle; for at the bottom saving comes too late.*

Before speaking on these particular proverbs, I need to say something about proverbs in general.

“Honor the Lord with your wealth, then your barns will be overflowing.”

So says Solomon. However, I would wager we have all heard of a man who honored the Lord with his wealth and died poor, or that we have all heard of a man who didn’t honor the Lord with his wealth and his barns were overflowing nonetheless.

“A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.”

Again, Solomon. Although, I suppose we’ve all heard of a wise son whose father took no delight in his son, and as a teacher, I have known a few foolish sons whose mothers delighted in them anyway, and sometimes even delighted in their foolishness.

Such cases are rare, but they are not impossible, and so we must understand that proverbs are not scientific laws. Proverbs are not mathematical equations. The fact that Hugh Hefner died with fifty million dollars in the bank stands in defiance of half the things Solomon wrote.

While proverbs do not use words like “usually,” “commonly,” “often,” or “typically”, proverbs describe the world as it usually, commonly, typically is. Not all wise sons bring joy to their fathers, but most of them do. Not all girls like flowers, but most of them do. Not all men like to grill, but most of them do. The wager of a proverb is that it is better to know most women like flowers than to know some women don’t.

Of course, this is true not only of the proverbs of Solomon, but the proverbs of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marcus Aurelius, Confucius, not to mention all the cultural proverbs we have inherited from the English and the French about agrarian life.

Proverbs describe the world as it is right down the middle. Proverbs describe the world as it is 98.1% of the time. It is telling that most of the proverbs in Scripture come from Solomon because the proverb is kingly wisdom. A king does not need to understand individuals so much as he needs to understand human nature. A king needs to know what will please most of the

people, what will alarm most of the people. A king needs to know what people are like, which means he needs to know what husbands are like, what cops are like, what prostitutes are like. A king needs to know the nature of things and proverbs report human nature. Proverbs are based on surveys of mankind. When I refer to human nature, I mean the conditions under which men tend to thrive or tend to fall apart. Whenever we discover what usually happens to a thing under certain conditions, we have discovered something about its nature. And so proverbs describe what usually becomes of men who touch other men's wives, what usually becomes of women who seduce men, what usually becomes of children who honor their parents, what usually becomes of men who drink before noon.

If you want to learn from proverbs, you must think yourself a usual man. If you want proverbs to have anything to do with you, you cannot think yourself atypical. You must think yourself ordinary, the kind of fellow that warning labels and parables were written for. If you want to learn from the wisdom of the ages, you have to give up thinking yourself special. If you're special, proverbs don't have anything to do with you.

As someone who has been a teacher for fifteen years, I have spoken to hundreds of parents about the souls of their teenage children, and I can say with confidence that people who think themselves special are some of the unhappiest and least productive people you will ever meet. They do not readily take advice, they are generally adverse to common sense, they do not think they will suffer by breaking the rules, and generally have very little sense of self-awareness and thus often cannot tell when they have embarrassed themselves horribly.

Of course, having set the word "special" within the context of proverbial wisdom, being special sounds very silly. However, there is a realm of human experience where men who think themselves common nonetheless have great difficulty releasing hold on the claim to be special. That is their marriages. It is one thing to say, "I am an average man," but most men feel some shame at saying, "I have an average marriage." Christian men especially feel shame at confessing their marriages average.

In a 2014 article for First Things entitled "The Good-Enough Marriage," Mark Regnerus wrote:

Amid well-intentioned efforts to reinforce or rebuild a disappearing marriage culture, there remains a persistent hazard—that in belaboring the beauty of marriage very many people in challenging unions will feel more discouraged, not less. Their marriages haven't felt wonderful for a very long time. Or the dismal follows the wonderful in a predictably cyclical fashion. Or misunderstanding seems chronic. Bedrooms become battlegrounds. It's not how marriage was intended to be, but it is how many turn and how some remain.

When I was a very young man, the idea of someday having a "good-enough marriage" was terrifying. In fact, the very expression "good-enough marriage" was self-defeating, self-contradictory, for any marriage I might describe as "good-enough" was, by definition, *not* good enough. I wanted a special marriage. And I thought myself equal to the task.

The desire for a special marriage was born of the fact that by the time I got married, I'd had three serious girlfriends, the third of whom I married, and all three had been long-distance

relationships. Long-distance relationships skew a fellow's understanding of marriage because in a long-distance relationship, the relationship is always about itself. This is broadly true of all young romances, but it especially true of love-distance romances.

“How can you say you love God, whom you cannot see, when you do not love men, whom you can see?” asks St. John, thus confirming our suspicions that it is harder to love someone who is far off than someone near. Long-distance romances are constantly on the verge of dissolving into nothingness and so, in order to last, they must constantly reassert themselves, even though there is very little to reassert. Many long-distance relationships end up chiefly concerning not the love of the other, but the love of love.

The participants in a long-distance relationship cannot really do anything together, they cannot accomplish anything, they cannot produce anything, cannot labor together— even though joint labor is what most healthy marriages consist of, day in and day out. The beginning of a marriage is not like this, though. The preface to most marriages is six months to a year of planning a wedding. Engaged or nearly engaged couples think constantly of the relationship itself which is emerging— how physically intimate should they be before marrying? Is it wise to spend so much time alone given the temptations which arise? Do their friends think it a good match? Will their families get on with one another?

Speaking and thinking of the relationship prior to marriage is far easier, though, than speaking of the marriage after the fact. This is because a man is free to marry for whatever reasons he likes. A man may marry a woman because she is kind, wise, virtuous, beautiful, rich, from a good family, or because he believes she will be a good mother, supportive wife. A man rarely has any difficulty explaining why he is marrying a woman.

But every great love ultimately involves taking an oath. Husbands make oaths to wives. Christians make oaths to God and church. Soldiers make oaths to their countries. And something strange happens to love the moment it passes through an oath. A man may marry a woman because she is kind and beautiful, but he cannot stay married to her for these reasons. His reasons for marrying are, in the act of marriage, sublimated into something higher, something beyond reason, something beyond words. I married my wife because she was good and beautiful, but when my students ask me why I love my wife, I typically give one of two responses. The first, “Because I have made an oath to God that I would love her,” and the second is, “I don't know.” The second is, to be honest, the far more truthful. It is a far more accurate assessment of the situation. She is still good and beautiful, but these are reasons I like her. These are reasons she is pleasant to live with. Were she to lose her beauty and her goodness, I would not be free to dissolve our marriage.

Oaths transcend rationality. For this very reason, the earliest Enlightenment philosophers were not fond of marriage. If it *makes sense* to live with someone and have children with someone, do it, and when it stops making sense, the relationship should obviously be dissolved. There is no need for some superstitious love incantation pronounced in a church before many witnesses to bind two people together eternally when they no longer love one another, no longer need one another, and would prefer the sexual company of others.

Returning to the quote from Petrarch, though, allow me to suggest, that when a relationship moves beyond reason, it has largely moved beyond words, as well. Not every arrangement of words is purely rational, of course, and so old married couples talk of the marriage itself from time to time. Nonetheless, the happiest marriages I have observed tend to be the ones wherein little time is given to the discussion of marriage. I mean the happiest husbands do not speak often of marriage theories, marriage theologies, gender roles, submission, complementarianism, or whatever Christian theology of marriage is fashionable at the moment. The same is true of childrearing, as well. Some of the worst parents I have ever known — the parents least competent to raise happy, pious children — are constantly reading books on childrearing, constantly commenting on the childrearing techniques of others, constantly describing the theories and research and books which stand behind their decision to sleep train, to spank or not spank, to give or not give an allowance.

Many older Christian men advise younger men that marriage is hard work and compromise, which is true, but we too often conceive of this hard work and compromise as being about marriage itself. Consider for a moment the staggering volume of popular, trendy Christian books on the subject of marriage. Every few years or so, some new concept is introduced by Christian book publishers as being the key to a good marriage, and a spate of books are issued which offer insights into achieving this quality. Thus, the “holy marriage,” the “biblical marriage,” the “vertical” marriage, the marriage which “restores,” the marriage which teaches you to “cherish” your partner, “respect” your partner, or instructional guides to what “radical” husbands do. Having written book proposals before, I can tell you that every fashionable book on marriage involved the author selling their unique, special take on the subject to Thomas Nelson, Zondervan or whoever.

Reading books on marriage is not part of the hard work of marriage. What is more, a great many marriage books advise readers on how to talk about their marriage, how to talk about their feelings about their spouse, how to talk about “needs” – in short, how to make the marriage itself a subject of conversation.

Ours is an age which believes— despite a staggering amount of evidence to the contrary— that sitting down and talking is a good way of sorting out our problems.

As a teacher, I can report that sitting down and talking with parents who are angry with me almost always makes things much, much worse. On average, my wife and I have two long conversations about a substantial disagreement every year. In these conversations, we talk about us, we talk about our feelings, our needs. We do not shout, we do not trot out our respective records of wrongs, and yet, on average, one of those conversations leads us to resolve our disagreement and the other makes the disagreement more pronounced and acrimonious. To be frank, we have been trained by rationalists and atheists to believe that “sitting down and talking” is the way sane humans solve their problems. While I have talked through some problems and disagreements in my life, the idea we can talk through our problems sounds lovely, but it’s just far too easy. It suggests we need not suffer much to solve our problems. There’s a lot of longsuffering which attends not presenting your case, which means not talking. Being quick to listen and slow to speak does not mean being quick to have conversation.

More than most people, writers feel and know the limitations of words. In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis writes, from the perspective of Orual, his protagonist:

Lightly men talk of saying what they mean. Often when he was teaching me to write in Greek [my old teacher] would say, 'Child, to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words.'

A glib saying. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about the joy of words.

The late Catholic short story writer Andre Dubus has a remarkable essay entitled "On Charon's Wharf," wherein he meditates on the silence required to take the Lord's Supper and the wordless meals he often enjoyed with his wife. I would like to read a portion of that essay now.

Since we are all terminally ill, each breath and step and day one closer to the last, I must consider those sacraments which soothe our passage. I write on a Wednesday morning in December when snow covers the earth, the sky is grey, and only the evergreens seem alive. This morning I received the sacrament I still believe in: at seven-fifteen the priest elevated the host, then the chalice, and spoke the words of the ritual, and the bread became flesh, the wine became blood, and minutes later I placed on my tongue the taste of forgiveness and of love that affirmed, perhaps celebrated, my being alive, my being mortal. This has nothing to do with immortality, with eternity; I love the earth too much to contemplate a life apart from it, although I believe in that life. No, this has to do with mortality and the touch of flesh, and my belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist is simple: without touch, God is a monologue, an idea, a philosophy; he must touch and be touched, the tongue on flesh, and that touch is the result of the monologues, the idea, the philosophies which led to faith; but in the instant of the touch there is no place for thinking, for talking; the silent touch affirms all that and goes deeper: it affirms the mysteries of love and mortality....

So many of us fail: we divorce wives and husbands, we leave the roofs of our lovers, go once again into the lonely march, mustering our courage with work, friends, half-pleasures which are not whole because they are not shared. Yet still I believe in love's possibility, in its presence on the earth; as I believe I can approach the altar on any morning of any day which may be the last and receive the touch that does not, for me, say: There is no death; but does say: In this instant I recognize, with you, that you must die.

And I believe I can do this in an ordinary kitchen with an ordinary woman and five eggs. I scramble them in a saucepan, as my now-dead friend taught me; they stand deeper and cook softer, he said. I take our plates, spoon eggs on them, we sit and eat. She and I in the kitchen have become extraordinary: we are not simply eating; we are pausing in the march to perform an act together; we are in love; and the meal offered and received is a sacrament which says: I know you will die; I am sharing food with you; it is all I can do, and it is everything.

As lovers we must have these sacraments, these actions which restore our focus, and therefore ourselves. For our lives are hurried and much too distracted, and one of the strangest and most dangerous of all distractions is this lethargy of self we suffer from, this part of ourselves that does

not want to get out of bed and once out of bed does not want to dress and once dressed does not want to prepare breakfast and once fed does not want to work. And what does it want? Perhaps it wants nothing at all. It is a mystery, a lovely one because it is human, but it is also dangerous. Some days it does not want to love, and we yield to it, we drop into an abyss whose walls echo with strange dialogues. These dialogues are with the beloved, and at their center is a repetition of the word I and sometimes you, but neither word now is uttered with a nimbus of blessing. These are the nights when we sit in that kitchen and talk too long and too much, so that the words multiply each other, and what they express — pain, doubt, anxiousness, dread — become emotions which are not rooted in our true (or better) selves, which exist apart from those two gentle people who shared eggs at this same table which now is soiled with ashes and glass-rings.

These nights can destroy us. With words we create genies which rise on the table between us, and fearfully we watch them hurt each other; they look like us, they sound like us, but they are not us, and we want to call them back, see them disappear like shriveling clouds back into our throats, down into our hearts where they can join our other selves and be forced again into their true size: a small I among many other I's. We try this with more words and too often the words are the wrong ones, the genies grow, and we are approaching those hours after midnight when lovers should never quarrel, for the night has its mystery too and will not be denied, it loves to distort the way we feel and if we let it, it will. We say: But wait a minute ... But you said ... But I always thought that ... Well how do you think I feel, who do you think you are anyway? Just who in the hell do you think you are?

I need and want to give the intimacy we achieve with words. But words are complex: at times too powerful or fragile or simply wrong; and they are affected by a tone of voice, a gesture of a hand, a light in the eyes. And words are sometimes autonomous little demons who like to form their own parade and march away, leaving us behind. Once in a good counselor's office I realized I was not telling the truth. She was asking me questions and I was trying to answer them, and I was indeed answering them. But I left out maybe, perhaps, I wonder. ... Within minutes I was telling her about emotions I had not felt. But by then I was feeling what I was telling her, and that is the explosive nitroglycerin seeping through the hearts of lovers.

So what I want and want to give, more than the intimacy of words, is shared ritual, the sacraments. I believe that, without those, all our talking, no matter how enlightened, will finally drain us, divide us into two confused and frustrated people, then destroy us as lovers. We are of the flesh, and we must turn with faith toward that truth. We need the companion on the march, the arms and lips and body against the dark of the night. It is our flesh which lives in time and will die, and it is our love which comforts the flesh. Beneath all the words we must have this daily acknowledgement from the beloved, and we must give it too or pay the lonely price of not living fully in the world: that as lovers we live on Charon's wharf, and he's out there somewhere in that boat of his, and today he may row in to where we sit laughing, and reach out to grasp an ankle, hers or mine.

It would be madness to try to live so intensely as lovers that every word and every gesture between us was a sacrament, a pure sign that our love exists despite and perhaps even because of our mortality. But we can do what the priest does, with his morning consecration before entering

the routine of his day; what the communicant does in that instant of touch, that quick song of the flesh, before he goes to work. We can bring our human, distracted love into focus with an act that doesn't need words, an act which dramatizes for us what we are together. The act itself can be anything: five beaten and scrambled eggs, two glasses of wine, running beside each other in rhythm with the pace and breath of the beloved. They are all parts of that loveliest of all sacraments between man and woman, that passionate harmony of flesh whose breath and dance and murmur says: We are, we are, we are . . .

Dubus' marriage sounds like a common one to me. It sounds "good enough."

Hesiod says: *At the beginning of the cask and at the end take thy fill, but be sparing in the middle; for at the bottom saving comes too late.*

The sparing middle Hesiod refers to is not just the common marriage but the common years of a marriage. In the beginning of the marriage, we drink deeply. The marriage itself is referred to often, considered, planned, forged. During times of great difficulty, the marriage returns to focus. When the bread winner is fired, when a child dies, we drink deeply. The great ceremonies of life always refer to beginnings and endings— this is true not only in your life and mine, but in the life of Christ Himself, for the greatest events in the Church calendar are Annunciation, Nativity, Good Friday, and Easter— all beginnings and endings. In the middle, though, we have ordinary time. Most of the liturgical year is ordinary time and so most of life and most of your life is the sparing middle.

We take our fill at the beginning and end because beginnings and endings are inherently holy and uncommon. New life comes from God and we drink deeply for new life because Heaven has opened up to earth. However, most of a marriage passes in the sparing middle and the reason the middle is sparing is because we have things to do. Drinking is about leisure, not about labor, but a common marriage accomplishes common tasks.

A common marriage is helpful, serviceable, practical, constructive, stable, which is to say not given to many great highs and many great lows, though great highs and great lows are the stuff of compelling drama, passionate music, and transcendent art. Speaking of a marriage tends to produce great highs and great lows, as Dubus notes, but speaking of a thing removes you from it.

As CS Lewis notes in his commentary on the myth of Orpheus, you cannot do a thing and reflect on doing it at the same time. You cannot see a thing and be a thing at once. You cannot see your own eyes, only their reflection.

However, your marriage does not need many, many great highs and great lows.

In the Orthodox ritual celebration of the Lord's Supper, each communicant comes to the front of the nave, waits in line, and finally receives tintured bread and wine from a chalice, offered to the tongue of the suppliant on the tip of a bronze spoon. No seconds are offered, neither can the suppliant eat less than the offering. Having presented himself for communion, the suppliant must eat what is given with simplicity. He needs neither more nor less bread and wine than what sits on the spoon. To live sacramentally— acknowledging the omnipresence of a holy God, from Whom all being is given, in Whom all being is sustained, to Whom all being must return—

means accepting with simplicity whatever the spoon of reality offers day by day. God has established “a time” for everything which must be done (Ecclesiastes 3), which means the “time to dance” is sanctified for dancing; dancing is the Eucharist of the time to dance. Gathering stones is the Eucharist of the time to gather stones. The Eucharist is a universal experience, for in the Eucharist, the infinite and unconsumable God is consumed. In the nave, the Eucharist binds all together; departing from the nave, the Eucharist is known variously, diversely in all the moments of our lives.

Day by day, God presents us with a time to work, a time to eat, a time to sleep, a time to read our children stories before bed. The working, the eating, the sleeping, the reading... from day to day, tradition, fate, family, society, and the Church have already determined for us what we should do. If a man is willing to be common and to live a common life filled with times and seasons which God makes common to all, he will submit himself to a mysterious, transcendent reality. The infinite Word entered finite history through a finite body; as a finite creature, through finite means, the common man enters the infinite. The man who is ever looking to make himself unique, to distinguish himself from others, to discern and seize the special things of the world—such a man will always isolate himself further and further until he is bereft of companions, bereft of comforters, heroes, and lovers.

In the end, we arrive at a startling paradox: the only way for a thing to truly be special is for it to be normal. The more special we try to make a thing, the more cut off that thing is from its nature, and it's nature is it's only way of returning to God.

The truth of nature is that we do not have to make the world special, we merely have to let things be what they are and to love them for what they are. You don't need to make your celebration of Christmas special. You need to celebrate Christmas, because Christmas is glorious. You don't need to throw special birthday parties for your children.

Once you understand what education actually is, you'll know that you don't need a special school, you just need a school. You can't make the Eucharist more special than it is. It's either the Eucharist or it's not. The desire for things to be special is usually nothing more than thinly veiled contempt for what things naturally are, which means there is something especially tragic in the father who is desperate for his son to be special. What is so wrong with a birthday party that you need a “special birthday party”? What is so wrong a honeymoon that you need your honeymoon to be a special honeymoon? What is wrong with a child that yours needs to be special? What is so wrong with marriage that yours needs to be special? Special is just fake holy.

God tends to not create holy things. He creates common things and then, through a series of predictable rituals and ceremonies and virtuous habits of being, transforms them into holy things. My plea, then, is that you think highly enough of marriage that you not seek after a special marriage. Buying flowers for your wife isn't going to make your marriage special. It's going to make it normal. Doing the dishes for your wife isn't going to make you a great husband. It's just going to make you a husband. All your striving will not produce something extraordinary, but something ordinary, and because God is God, what is ordinary is very good. Very good enough.