



TILL DEATH DO US PART: IS IT POSSIBLE TODAY?

By Jim & Susan Vogt

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Some of the most important insights we've learned about marriage have been from divorced people! But what can a divorced person know about building a lasting marriage you ask? Sometimes the most hard-earned knowledge can be the most remembered. For many years, in addition to leading marriage preparation and enrichment programs, we also were responsible for divorce ministry in two dioceses. It's a humbling experience to listen to the painful experiences of divorced men and women who fully expected to have a lasting marriage, yet saw their hopes and lives crumble around them. Following are some insights we learned from them and from reflecting on our own marriage.

The most important three things to keep a marriage healthy are commitment, commitment, and commitment. With the divorce rate hovering around 50% it may seem that commitment has gone out of style. Has human nature really changed that much? Well, human nature may not have changed, but the culture we live in has. No longer is there as strong a cultural support for life long marriage. We live in a throw-away society of disposable diapers, water bottles, packaging, and technology. If something breaks, many times our first impulse is to get a new one rather than to fix the old.

In addition, our society has more temptations than previous generations. With men and women working as colleagues, spouses spend a lot of their day in the company of people of the opposite sex who share common interests and are on their best behavior. (Workplace morals may not always be high, but at least colleagues don't have spit-up on their clothes or wear a raggedy t-shirt.) Your spouse may have been alluring and exciting during courtship, but someone who shares your life's work can be a strong temptation. Thus throwing away a spouse when the first one starts looking raggedy or we tire of each other's foibles and workplace temptations do make commitment harder than it used to be.

The good news is that even though it may be getting harder to keep a marriage commitment, marriage is also getting better. It used to be enough for the husband to be a good provider and the wife to take care of the home and children. Now, however, couples want to be soul-mates. There is an expectation that they will communicate on a deep level, share their hopes and dreams, be life partners and best friends. This is a tall order, but worthy of the sacrament of matrimony – it just takes more effort and intentionality. So how does a couple sustain commitment amidst higher expectations for marriage? With skill and grace. Determination to stay together can go a long way to making a marriage work, but it needs to be accompanied by the skills of commitment – the primary skill being communication. If a couple is not willing to learn the basic skills of speaking honestly, speaking for self, listening, sharing feelings appropriately, and conflict resolution, their commitment is hollow.

Another quality that supports commitment is having common values. A couple doesn't need to agree on which restaurant to go to, but if one values a simple lifestyle and the other wants to accumulate wealth, there will be constant tension. If faith and morals are important to one spouse and not to the other, most important decisions will be reasons to fight.

So what does the church have to say about marriage that offers more than the conventional wisdom of commit, communicate, and seek someone with common values? The church says of course what Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) St. Paul reinforces this with “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God.” (1 John 4:16) The bottom line is that the couple must love each other with their whole mind, heart, and soul and God promises to be with them in this holy love. The church in her wisdom, also knows, however, how easy it is to say “I love you” and how hard it is to actually live those words. The wedding vows are a short few words that take a lifetime to live out. Let’s try to unpack the grace behind the vows.

- **Exclusivity** – *I, _____, take you, _____ to be my (wife/husband).*

It’s significant that the bride and groom’s names are used. It indicates that this is an exclusive commitment between just these two people.

- **Fidelity** – *I promise to be true to you*

In most people’s minds fidelity gets translated as sexual fidelity – neither of us will commit adultery. In healthy marriages, however, fidelity goes beyond the commitment to not have an affair and also extends to all the daily ways couples “affair-proof” their marriage. There can be many mistresses in a marriage that don’t take human form. Is your work, a hobby, the children, even generous volunteer work, cutting into romance time and the attention you need to devote to each other?

- **Unconditional love** – *In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health*

To love unconditionally is a promise for the future. It has to do more with the decision to love than merely the feeling of love. Can I love you when your body has lost it’s vigor and beauty? Can I love you through annoying habits and even when you do things that hurt me? Not knowing what changes the future will bring, can I love you if you become old, ugly, fat, or senile. Think about it. That’s a lot to say a blind “yes” to.

- **Covenant** – *To love you and honor you*

A covenant is a promise that goes deeper than a contract. Contracts are legal documents that spell out rights and duties. Contracts can be broken if one party doesn’t hold up their end of the bargain. On the other hand, a covenant goes beyond a 50/50 agreement. Sometimes one spouse will need to bend 75% of the way while the other only gives 25%. It’s not always fair, but it’s a promise that doesn’t count the cost.

- **Permanence** – *All the days of my life.*

Traditionally permanence is understood as not getting divorced. Yet, that sells it short for divorce happens way before papers are served. A commitment to permanence means a daily attentiveness to the relationship. It might mean a nightly walk, not just for exercise but to keep communication flowing. It’s preventive maintenance.

- **Prayer** – *Amen.*

Amen is a short prayer but it’s the couple’s way of saying “yes” to each other and to God. Don’t let it be the last time you invite God into your marriage.

Jim and Susan Vogt are the parents of four young adult children and live in Covington, Ky. Jim is director of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative and Susan is a speaker and writer on marriage, parenting, and spirituality. See www.SusanVogt.net