

Living the Life Together

Andy and Carol have been married for more than 15 years. They're active in their church and are part of the leadership team for the junior high ministry. The dedicated parents of two soon-to-be-teens, they appear to have the perfect family.

Recently, however, Carol has grown emotionally detached. She doesn't feel loved, wanted, or appreciated by Andy or the children. "I've given and given to them over the years," she told me. "I just don't have anything more to give. Now I don't seem to care anymore."

Not surprisingly, she has entertained serious thoughts about divorce.

Steve and Jennifer were made for each other, everyone said. At the time of their wedding, he had just finished an outstanding college career, leading his basketball team to

a regional title. Jennifer, a beautiful young woman, had excelled in college and planned to become a teacher. Less than two years later, however, their marriage had become a battlefield, and their future was in grave doubt.

Soon after their honeymoon, Jennifer discovered that Steve's temper is a daily land mine, exploding on a moment's notice. "At first, I tried to avoid doing anything that might set him off, but it didn't work," she told their pastor (unbeknownst to Steve). "Eventually, I responded by becoming just as hot-headed myself."

She continued, "Something has to change. Our marriage won't survive much more of this."

Rick knew his wife, Bridget, wasn't happy, but he never expected her to be unfaithful. She was the mother of their three children and an immaculate housekeeper. She had taught a first-grade Sunday school class for years and was adored by her students.

Then one day she announced to Rick, "I've found a man who makes me feel loved and appreciated. I want out of our marriage." Rick's feelings didn't matter, and neither did the devastation she had brought on their kids.

Unfortunately, the struggles of these three couples are typical of today's Christian marriages. When you look at the divorce statistics, you see there's little difference between the survival rates of Christian and non-Christian unions. Why is that? If a husband and wife are both believers in Jesus Christ, shouldn't their personal relationship with the God of the Universe make a difference in their marriage? Shouldn't they have a "leg up" on the rest of the world?

If we, as individuals and married couples, were living what God intends to be normal Christian lives, in tune with the Counselor He sent us to guide and empower us, our marriages would be setting us apart from the rest of the world.

In a word, yes. So why are so many Christian marriages in trouble; and why do so many end in the tragedy of divorce? The answer is amazingly simple, but with profound implications. From our own years of marriage and counseling with other couples, we are convinced that most Christians today do not understand how God wants to accomplish His work in our lives and in our homes. As a result, we have mediocre lives and mediocre marriages that are, indeed, little different from those of our unsaved friends.

If we, as individuals and married couples, were living what God intends to be normal Christian lives, in tune with the Counselor He sent to guide and empower us, our marriages *would* be setting us apart from the rest of the world. We would experience far more healthy and, when necessary, healed families, and far fewer divorces. In fact, the Holy Spirit wants our marriages to be a reflection of His power and His presence. We would enjoy what God intends for our relationships.

What Is the Normal Christian Life?

What should this normal Christian life and marriage be? The answer isn't hard to find; it's spelled out in the Bible. We could look at many passages that come at the subject from distinct perspectives, but let's consider just a few to start.

In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul made the point to his readers that they were no longer required to obey the Jewish law first given to Moses. Instead, they (and we) were free to—and should—live by faith, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. And what qualities would the Spirit produce in those yielded to Him? What would be the fruit of His work in their lives?

Paul listed those distinctives in chapter 5: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (verses 22,23). If we're living as God intends, the Spirit will be developing these qualities in us, and they will be clearly visible in our lives and marriages. But if we don't walk in the Spirit, we will naturally walk in the power of the flesh, or sin, which produces sexual immorality, relational hostility, and emotions such as anger and bitterness (see verses 19-21).

Notice that the very first thing we should see is love. Jesus said the same thing when He identified the trait that would mark us as His disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34,35). And immediately after that He talked about the coming of the

Holy Spirit. This unique capacity to love is made possible by the Holy Spirit's work in us.

We are to love one another as the Savior loves us—sacrificially, without condition, putting the other person's needs ahead of our own. That's not easy, to say the least, but that's the kind of love the Spirit wants to produce in us and in our relationships.

Next, the normal Christian life should be characterized by joy. "Be joyful always," Paul said. Even when things aren't going as well as we'd like, we can have a deep, abiding joy in the Lord when we're walking through each day with the Spirit.

The next character quality is peace. If there's anything that people in our culture seem to need, it's this. So few of us, including Christians, appear to have it. Yet it's a natural part of the Spirit's effective presence in our lives. In fact, immediately after Jesus gave the promise of the coming of the Spirit in John 14, He added, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (verse 27). It's God's peace, a divine peace. Only He can give it—but that's exactly what He wants to do through His indwelling Spirit. So we have peace with God, which allows us to have peace with each other.

Patience is another part of the Spirit's fruit and another mark of the normal Christian life and marriage. In the famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul first talked about the importance of love. Then in verse 4 he began to describe love, and the first thing he said was, "Love is patient"—it suffers long in relation to the actions of another.

When we and our spouse aren't seeing eye to eye, or when our spouse does his or her annoying habit for at least the thousandth time, how do we respond? If the Spirit is in control, we respond patiently.

We also respond with kindness. "Love is kind" was Paul's very next description in 1 Corinthians 13:4. It has been said, and is too often true, that we tend to treat strangers better than we treat the members of our own families, including our spouse. If we were to ask your spouse whether you treat him or her kindly, what answer would we get? If you're like us, there are times when the answer would be painful to hear. Yet here again, kindness is part of what the Spirit is eager to produce in our individual lives and in our marriages.

Our lives are also to be marked by goodness. This quality, like all those that make up the fruit of the Spirit, mirrors the nature of God Himself. As Psalm 34:8 tells us, "Taste and see that the LORD is good." Goodness means praiseworthy character and moral excellence. Would those around you say you have those? Would your spouse? If the Spirit is allowed to work in you, you'll have them more and more.

Faithfulness is the next part of the Spirit's fruit. It means dependability and loyalty. It means that when we say we'll do something, we do it. It means that even in those times when we don't particularly like our spouse, we still keep our vows, including the one to protect our marriage bed. Deuteronomy 7:9 describes God as "the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands." His people, in turn, are to be called "the faithful" (Psalm 31:23).

Like the other dimensions of the fruit of the Spirit, this one isn't easy. In fact, only the Spirit can develop faithfulness in us. And that's exactly what He wants to do.

Gentleness, another characteristic of the normal Christian life and marriage, isn't one we're always eager to seek, especially those of us who are men. That's because men usually equate it with weakness, which they definitely don't want. But that's *not* what the Bible has in mind when it tells us, for example, "Let your gentleness be evident to all" (Philippians 4:5).

Biblically, gentleness means "power under control." Think of a huge, powerful horse, able to pull a heavy wagon for miles. There's tremendous energy, enormous strength there. But it's under control; it's not running wild, going off in every direction, doing more harm than good. It's harnessed, productive, being used for a positive purpose.

That's the kind of gentleness the Spirit brings forth in those who are yielded to Him.

Our Christian lives and relationships should be characterized by self-control. As I have said before, when under a lot of pressure, I have at times been impatient and insensitive with Teri. If ever there's a clear sign that I'm not in touch with the Spirit, that's it. But He has been working in me in this area, and I can honestly say that with His help, I've been doing much better in recent years. In fact, I wouldn't mind if you asked Teri to confirm that statement!

And finally, there is self-control. The dramatic increase in sexual sins and divorce among Christians in recent years is, in part, testimony to the decline in self-control in the church. Especially in today's sex-saturated and me-first

culture, self-control is difficult. But that's no surprise to God. The writer of Proverbs recognized both the importance and the challenge of self-control when he wrote, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city" (Proverbs 16:32, NASB).

Once again, only the Spirit can develop that kind of self-control in us as we relate to each other in marriage. And that's what He will do, more and more, as we cooperate with Him.

Christ Living in Us

But how does it happen? How does the Holy Spirit transform our lives so that we experience love, joy, peace and all the other relational delights in our lives?

Paul gave us the answer in Galatians 2:20 when he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." When we see ourselves as having died with Christ and we put to death our own desires, our own agenda, the Holy Spirit begins to reproduce the life of Christ in us. When we surrender control of our lives to the Holy Spirit, He magnifies Jesus Christ in us, and then we begin to relate to others the way our Savior does. In essence, the fruit of the Holy Spirit is the product of Christ living His life through us as we respond to the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus promised the Counselor, He was telling His disciples that His very life would be made real in them by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Now you have an overview of what the normal Christian life and marriage should be like—the quality of life God intends for us, and what the Holy Spirit wants to produce. How well does your marriage match up to that description now? How much more would you like it to?

We trust you would appreciate having a lot more of the fruit of the Spirit in your personal life (that's where it starts) and in your relationship with your spouse. So let's turn our attention now to gaining a better understanding of just *who* the Spirit is and *how* he wants to work in and through us.

Heavenly Father,

I want to experience the full measure of the Spirit's work in my life and in my relationship with _____ (spouse). Fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I may live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

In the Savior's name. Amen.