



Marriage - Nagging and Spiritual Growth

Marriage in the Orthodox Faith is one of the major paths for our salvation. In marriage couples can aid each other in their journey towards salvation. The other major path is celibacy found in the monastic life. Both are recognized as valid paths for salvation.

Saint Paul reminds of the following,

I...beseech you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.(Eph 4:1-3)

Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

The reality is that today a majority of marriages fail. The divorce rate now approaches 50%. One common issue that leads to separating is what is known as nagging. Elizabeth Bernstein recently wrote about this “killer of marriages” in the Wall Street Journal (1/25/12). She points out that nagging is a problem more common than adultery.

What is nagging? It is the interaction between couples where one person repeatedly makes a request that the other repeatedly ignores so that both become increasingly annoyed. As I write this I am currently being nagged by my wife to fix the fountain on the porch and I have ignored her for several days. Like Elizabeth points out, nagging makes me feel like a little boy being scolded by my mother for not doing a chore. Why does she have to keep reminding of this little task when I will eventually fit it into my schedule? I don't really need a mother at my age. So how do we keep this behavior from becoming something that leads us to anger and a desire to separate? It becomes serious when the issue shifts from the object of the nagging to the nagging itself. Dr. Howard Markman of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver points out that couples who can resolve this problem will substantially improve their chances of having a long lived marriage.

This kind of interpersonal issue is exactly what the spiritual path calls us to resolve. What we are learning in such situations is how to love one another. These irritants, such as nagging, can help us grow stronger in our faith. They can be like the grain of sand in an oyster that leads to a beautiful pearl. As we learn to love one another in our disputes we also learn to love God. These marital spats can separate us from God and lead us away from salvation or they can lift us to overcome our self-centeredness, teaching us how to love, leading us along the path to our eventual union with our loving God.

Here is some secular advice about how to overcome nagging from the Bernstein article.

Calm down and recognize the pattern you are in and begin to talk about it as a problem that will have an impact not only on your marriage but on your spiritual life as well.



Recognize that both will need to make some changes in behavior.

Look at it from the other person's perspective. Use the tried and true "I messages." "Honey, when you ignore me I feel you do not love me."

Recognize that you are asking for something if you are the nagger .

Change to using an "I message" instead of a "you message". Not "I want you to fix the fountain. You never do what I want." but "I would really like it if You could fix the fountain today. I know you are busy but this is something that means a lot to me."

Manage expectations. Make sure what you are asking for is realistic.

Set a time frame by asking your spouse when they could do the task.

Give a clear response to your partner if you are the naggee. Tell her if you can't do it right now and let her know when you can do it. If you cannot do what is being asked, give the reasons and discuss alternatives.

Resolving conflicts than result from nagging is important for marital health. Remember that love of neighbor (and who is a closer neighbor than your spouse) is the first work we must strive for to become a true disciple of Christ. In a marriage we must all bear each others burdens and when we condemn the other person we are only condemning ourselves.

"Unless you promptly strive for and achieve a loving peace between you, it is hopeless to bring tidiness and fairness to your dealings with one another. Humble yourself, not her. Love her, not yourself." (Russian Letters of Direction, Monk Makariĭ)

Regular time for daily prayer together is very important in developing a strong Christian marriage. Saint Gregory Palamas writes,

Let no one think, my brother-Christians, that it is the duty of only priests and monks to pray without ceasing, and not of laymen. No, no! It is the duty of all us Christians to remain in prayer always.

Saint Nicholas of Zhicha writes,

Marriage is a great and wonderful mystery, one of the greatest mysteries of God's dispensation. A pure and honorable marriage, in the fear of God, is indeed a vessel of the Holy Spirit.

I am now off to fix the fountain.