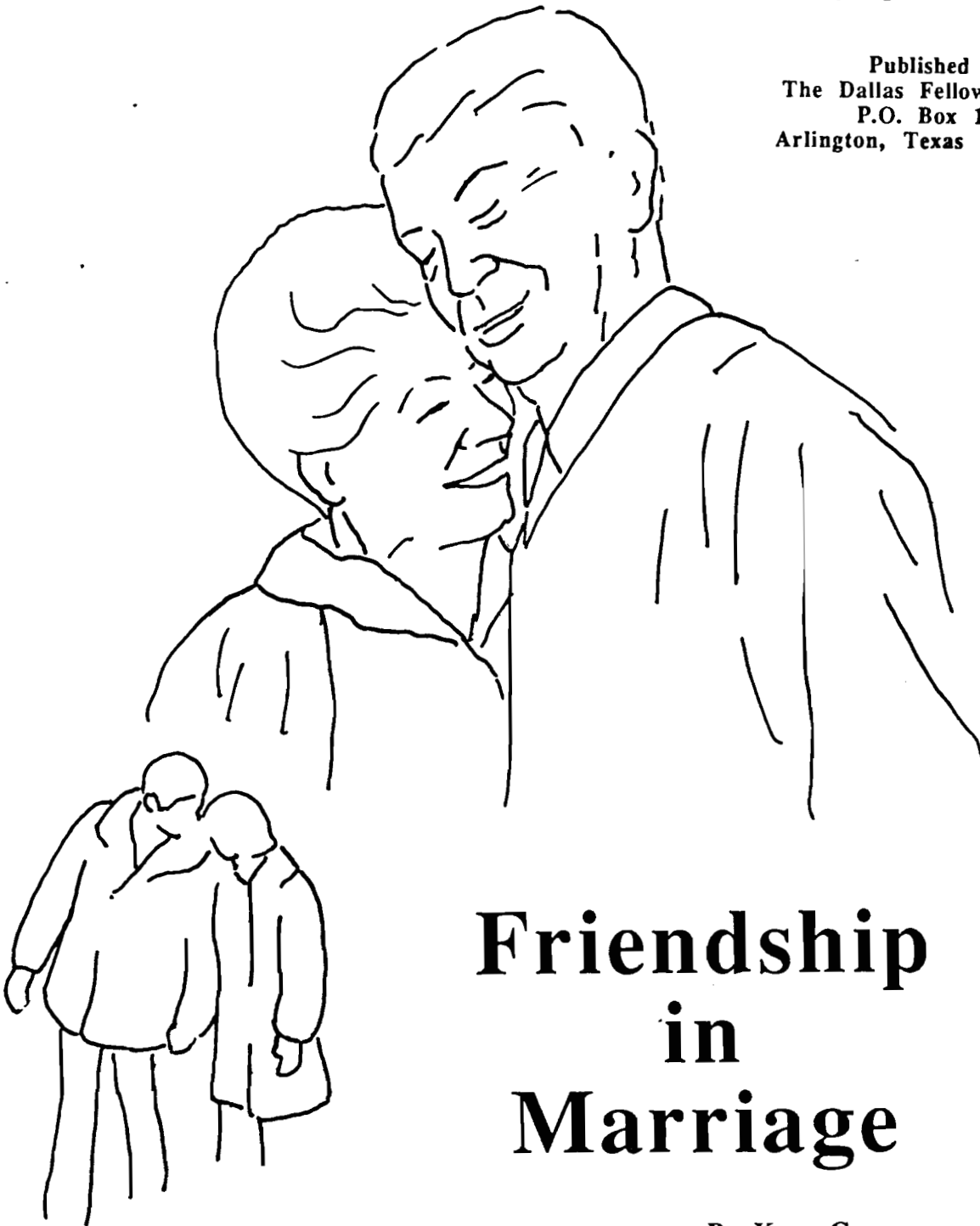


Reprinted from

*The Circles*

Spring-Summer 1986

Published by  
The Dallas Fellowship, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1203  
Arlington, Texas 76004-1203



# Friendship in Marriage

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For years now on Valentine's Day I have chosen three cards for my husband. One I sign "your sweetheart," one "your lover," and the third "your friend." There is a great deal of truth in that little tradition. Perhaps years ago when I started it, I intuitively recognized that there were three aspects of being married.

Our world is very familiar with the "lover" aspect of being a husband or wife. Sexual attraction is a basic component of a firm marital foundation. Unfortunately, it's easy for people to make the mistake of entering a marriage where sex is the only ingredient holding the couple together.

Being sweethearts equates in my mind to being "in love." That phrase is difficult to define—books have been written trying to do just that. Being in love has to do with the little leap of joy when you see each other at

the end of the day. It's the fresh element in the relationship which keeps you eager for each other's company day after day. It's that touch of romance in your life together.

These first two elements usually are what get people into marriages in the first place. But if the two who marry don't become friends, being in love can fade to a tired old cliché and even the strongest sexual attraction can weaken.

### **Friendship is the core of the marriage relationship.**

Friendship in a marriage involves an *intimacy* that destroys your sense of loneliness and makes life vivid and real. Friendship is expressed in a steady, underlying *affection* that makes time together so satisfying and mutually enriching. Friendship also involves a *respect* for each other

that builds the character and confidence of both. As the friendship grows, the *commitment* to each other which develops provides a nourishing security.

#### **Intimacy**

I'm convinced that every person in the world is seeking intimacy—with God and with other human beings. Each person wants to remove the masks and drop the poses that he somehow ended up with. Each one wants to be seen as he is—and loved. Many people don't recognize what they are looking for, and they look in strange places: drugs, sexual liaisons, intellectual prowess, the camaraderie of sports, war, causes, crime. Real, genuine intimacy is hard to find—and it is the strongest mark of a marriage between friends.

Recently I was asked to explain why I was attracted to my best friend (my husband). The first thing that popped into my head was—"because I can reveal myself completely, even when I'm being my worst me, and he still goes on loving me." It's not that I can say anything to him. There are things I don't say because they would do no good, only harm. But I can be me—good, bad and in between. He goes on believing in my basic goodness, knowing I will grow, and taking the less-than-perfect as a part of the package. This acceptance is essential for intimacy to exist successfully.

It's a great joy to feel the security of knowing I am loved just as I am. I can express my hopes, desires and dreams without being laughed at, reasoned with or dismissed. I feel free

to share a thing of beauty and know it will be appreciated. I can think through a situation or an idea out loud with a sympathetic listener.

Life can be lived in the shadows without genuinely touching other people, but I don't believe that is truly living. The aching need to know and be known is always there. Being intimate with your life partner destroys loneliness and makes life together *real*—rich and full and solid.

#### **Affection**

When I was a young teenager, my mother explained solemnly to me that a girl could fall in love with a man she didn't like and that anyone who had that misfortune was headed for misery. It was a wise piece of advice.

Affection is a basic and simple element in a healthy friendship. It's easy to answer the question, "Do I *like* this person?" when it's simply an acquaintance. But when you're looking through the rose-colored glasses of "in-love-ness" or feeling the heated pull of sexual attraction, it's much harder to determine the answer to that question. Marriage involves spending a phenomenal amount of time together over many years. The partners need to *like* each other.

Spouses who are friends enjoy each other's humor, share at least some common interests and tastes, and are interested in each other's opinions, theories and convictions. Most important, they see in each other things they admire, perhaps even characteristics they would like to have themselves. This last is one of the reasons why husbands and wives who are friends grow from just being

together.

It's important too that affection be expressed. One partner reminds the other of a warm memory or one of those private little jokes. Many little non-sexual touches pass between husband and wife—a pat, a squeeze, a soft, soothing rub of the hand, just little things. Small gifts are important too: biscuits from scratch because he loves them, clipping an article on one of her favorite interests. It is these small, simple gestures made a hundred times a day, year after year, which supply proof of the healthy glow of gentle pleasure between two people.

#### **Respect**

Good friends treat each other with respect. So often married couples fail to do this simple thing. There is a certain amount of self-discipline involved in treating your marriage partner with respect. Getting intimate with another person reveals the vulnerable spots that everyone has. The one who is closest to you can hurt you most. Treating your spouse with respect means exercising the discipline to refrain from hitting in those tender spots. When the arguments heat up, there are still things you hold back from saying or doing because that's where your partner is vulnerable.

The attitude of respect grows out of liking your partner. If you have a basic appreciation for your mate's strengths and an understanding acceptance of her faults, that affection shows in your treatment of her. You have faith in her. You allow her to

make her own mistakes. You're very sparing with criticism and liberal with encouragement. You maintain an awareness of her particular likes and dislikes. You are courteous and considerate.

I know of nothing which will feed healthy self-respect like the obvious respect of those closest to you.

#### **Commitment**

In our culture it has become popular to look down on security in relationships, to equate it with boredom, possessiveness, or being taken for granted. Security is none of those things. People need to feel secure in their relationships so that they can relax, be themselves and then grow into better and better selves. A child whose parents do not adequately convey their love for him or her does not grow and develop optimally. He is psychologically stunted. A person who is unsure of the love of his spouse does not grow and develop as he should either. Security is very important. It comes from commitment on the part of both partners.

Commitment in a marriage does not come from the marriage license nor the vows. Commitment is an attitude on the part of each partner which grows as they live together and build a loving, strong relationship. Commitment is a basic loyalty to each other.

The committed partner is going to be there when the relationship goes through difficult periods. It is amazing how much effect your attitude can have. The partners who are deter-

mined to stay together and improve their marriage can frequently do it. The committed partner is not going to question the fairness of the arrangement when he has to carry more than his share at times. He's not keeping score. He knows the marriage is worth whatever the cost.

The security of mutual commitment is the soil from which two strong individuals draw sustenance.

It's easier to talk about intimacy, affection, respect and commitment than it is to make them a way of life. So I'd like to share two things which have occurred to me which I feel are very beneficial in building friendship in a marriage: choosing to risk and giving without measure.

#### **Choosing To Risk**

Marriage is a risky business. By that I am not referring to the high percentage of marriage failures. A good marriage—one where the partners are fast friends—cannot be had without taking some risks.

Any time you reveal your weaknesses to another person, you run the risk that he or she will exploit them for his selfish ends. Weaknesses can be used to hurt in retaliation, to enhance a bargaining position, to manipulate. The dangers are intimidating.

Chances have to be taken in order to make progress. If you keep your true self hidden from your partner from fear of exposure and vulnerability, you don't get the security of observing that your partner has *not* used that knowledge against you. Trust and growing intimacy is built upon

just such risks.

Risking exposure and hurt is frightening, but the alternative is defeat. The one who holds back on revealing himself to his partner through fear of being hurt, insures that there will not be genuine intimacy in the marriage. He has given up on friendship before he has even given it a chance.

To choose fear is to be sure that you will fail. The result will be either a broken marriage or a lifeless one devoid of the intimacy which might have made it great. Choosing to risk self-revelation may result in pain, but it is also the way to a rich friendship and solid marriage.

#### **Giving Without Measure**

A marriage in which one or both partners are holding back has got two strikes against it. Marriage is a situation that requires wholehearted efforts. It's like baking a cake. The chemical reactions which produce a light, fluffy cake take place at approximately 350 degrees. You can't turn the oven on to 175 degrees and promise to turn the temperature up if things go well. What you get is a disaster.

A good marriage can't be had without each partner giving of himself. Somewhere along the way I heard that if you don't feel like you're doing 75% of the giving in a marriage, you're probably giving too little. I think that's true. Each person perceives his own giving differently from the way his partner does. What may feel like a sacrifice to one person may appear insignificant to his part-

ner. He may feel that he's given 125% and she hardly noticed.

The best approach is not to keep score—to give without measure. Give because your partner needs or wants it not because she deserves it. The universe isn't run on the basis of getting what you deserve. God sets the pattern. He gives because you need. The more you need, the more he gives. And giving like that—giving without measure—has wonderful effects: it makes the recipient more than he was.

It occurred to me only days ago that one of the reasons my husband treats me as he does is *the way I have treated him*. There were times, especially early in our marriage, when resentment or antagonism on my part could have brought out a very different person in him—a rigid, vicious opponent. The mutual nurturing of our relationship has brought out the best in him. He is flexible, giving and considerate. Love and giving really do bring out the highest potentials in people.

But to bring out the best in people, giving needs to be genuine. You need to act from a sincere desire to give. Sometimes people give for other reasons. People may give because it is expected of them. I have talked with many women who learned to do things for family and friends, not because they wanted to but because they felt it was expected of them. Unfortunately they resented feeling that they were being taken for granted in this way. Their giving was weakened by the resentment inside of them.

That kind of generosity does not have the same miraculous effect of a freely given gift.

A second harmful reason for giving is the selfish desire to tie the other person down with a sense of debt. Giving with "strings" attached frequently causes the other to pull away.

Sometimes people mistakenly enter a marriage only tentatively. A wife may be waiting until her husband shows he loves her, then she will respond by giving freely. By doing so she is withholding the very thing which would make possible a successful marriage: her love. Her love is the sunshine which would bring forth the blooms of his maturing love. The same is true when the husband withholds his love. The situation is a mutual one: each nurtures the other and receives in turn. And the love that grows exceeds all logical expectation.

Giving that is genuine and free has the miraculous effect of uplifting both people. Giving without measure produces a bumper crop of love.

Originally I spoke of three elements in a marriage: sexual attraction, being in love, and friendship. Perhaps you wondered why I mentioned *being in love* but not *loving*. Being in love is a wanting condition. You want the person you are in love with. You want his presence, his attention, his comfort, his partnership. Love, on the other hand, is a giving condition. Love is the desire to give to the loved one—whatever he may need. In the final analysis it is friendship which matures into love. ●