



## **Three Essential Ingredients in a Thriving Marriage**

### **Leslie Vernick LSCW**

Many of us have grown up in homes where sinful attitudes and destructive behavior is accepted as normal. We're so used to being mistreated or disrespected, controlled and manipulated we don't recognize it as such.

On the other hand, some of us grew up on a steady diet watching Hollywood and Harlequin's version of love and marriage. They portray unrealistic and distorted ideas around love and marriage as well. They want us to believe that if you have enough sexual passion, the rest of the relationship is easy. It's a lie.

Let's look at what are some of the foundational ingredients for a marriage to be healthy and why these basics are crucial if a marriage is going to flourish.

### ***Essentials to Thriving Relationships***

Every grown-up relationship requires three essential ingredients to thrive: mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom.

***Mutuality*** means that both individuals contribute specific qualities essential for the care, maintenance, and repair of the relationship. They are honesty, caring, respect, responsibility, and

repentance. In marriage, both individuals make efforts to grow and change for the welfare of the other and the preservation of their relationship.

Destructive relationships lack mutuality. Tim Keller in his book on marriage writes, “The Christian teaching [on marriage] does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup> When you are the only one in your marriage caring, repenting, being respectful and honest, sacrificing and working toward being a better spouse, or having a good marriage, you are a godly wife but you don’t have a healthy or biblical marriage.

Paul writes about the importance of mutuality in healthy relationships throughout his teachings. For example, he wrote, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also” (2 Corinthians 6:11-13 NIV).

When you are the only one in your marriage caring, repenting, being respectful and honest, sacrificing and working toward being a better spouse, you are a godly wife but you don’t have a healthy or biblical marriage.

Paul also emphasized mutuality throughout his teaching on marriage. Husbands and wives may have different roles and responsibilities but he calls both to mutually fulfill them. Paul explains the mutuality of the sexual relationship. He writes, “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and *likewise* the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. *Likewise* the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Corinthians 7:3-4 ESV).

Peter too speaks of mutuality when he writes, “*Likewise*, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives when they see your respectful and pure conduct.” And, “*Likewise* husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:1-2,7 ESV).

These instructions to husbands and wives work great *only* when they are practiced by both the husband and the wife. Both are to give, both are to sacrifice to meet the needs of the other. When these directives are not practiced mutually, it is a very different picture. That does not give wives permission to give up or to disobey God’s instructions although that path is tempting when we feel mistreated and angry. Instead, talk to God about how to handle this lack of mutuality and your hurt feelings. You do not have the power to turn a bad marriage into a good marriage all by yourself. But Peter reminds us that by our godly attitude and actions we can behave in ways that can influence our husband to surrender to God’s transforming work of change in his life (1 Peter 3). Throughout this book I’ll show you wise ways you can do this even when your marriage is destructive.

This brings us to the second essential ingredient of a thriving relationship: reciprocity.

***Reciprocity*** means that both people in the relationship give and both people in the relationship receive. Power and responsibility are shared and there is not a double standard where one person gets all the goodies in the relationship while the other person sacrificially does most of the work. The apostle Paul validates reciprocity when he gives guidelines how to give our resources sacrificially but not foolishly. He writes, “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness” (2 Corinthians 8:13-14 ESV).

Destructive marriages are not reciprocal and therefore don't thrive. One person demands power over the other and relegates their partner to the status of a slave or a child. For example, John required Mary to be accountable for every penny she spent yet John did not hold himself to that same standard. He always had an excuse as to why his spending was more justified than Mary's and often spent large amounts of money without telling her. Mary worked a full time job as did John. Mary was required to direct deposit her entire paycheck into their joint account. John only deposited an equal dollar amount of his paycheck into their joint account. The rest of his income was put in a separate account with only his name on it. Mary had no access to it, nor did she even know what John's income was. There was no "we" to their financial decisions, John held all the financial power, Mary felt like a child being given an allowance.

To rebalance their marriage and create a healthier relationship Mary will need to speak up and require more reciprocity from John. And John will have to change how he sees and treats Mary. She needs to become his partner, not his possession if their marriage is to become healthy. (How to have that kind of discussion will be covered in section three.)

Something to keep in mind is that there may be seasons in every marriage where one person gives more than the other due to illness, incapacity or other problems, but when that happens, as soon as the individual is capable, the relationship is rebalanced and power and responsibility are again mutually shared.

Lastly, our third essential ingredient of a thriving relationship is freedom.

**Freedom** means that in your marriage you are allowed to make choices, to give input, and to express your feelings without fearing you'll be badgered, manipulated and punished. When freedom is present, we're not afraid to be ourselves nor are we pressured to become something we're not.

Freedom is an essential component in all healthy adult relationships. We've all witnessed the results in world history, in fundamentalist religious groups, and in families where freedom is squashed. Members are not free to question, to challenge, to think differently than the group. They are not free to grow or to be themselves without fear of retaliation. Instead they have to do and say and be what the group or person in charge tells them. That is not healthy or God's plan.

Although God wants unity in a family and in the family of God, he created great diversity. We are to be ourselves and be of one mind all at the same time. This one mind idea doesn't mean melding ourselves into the desires or demands of another individual but together living for a common purpose and goal, the kingdom and glory of God.

Married couples need freedom to thrive. I do not mean the freedom to do whatever you want regardless how the other person feels. When you commit to someone in marriage, you freely choose to limit some (not all) of your choices. But all healthy relationships need freedom to disagree, to respectfully challenge someone's decisions and to be the person God made them to be. Having your freedom of movement, choices, friends, and emotional expression restricted by your husband sends the message that you are not allowed to be a whole person in your own marriage. Instead you are to become what your husband tells you to be. This is not healthy for you, for him, or for your marriage.

Adapted from *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage* by Leslie Vernick by permission of WaterBrook Press, division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher