



TWO

IT LOOKED DIFFERENT IN THE PICTURE

Expectations

“I’m taking you on a vacation to *paradise*.” Those were my dad’s exact words at the family meeting that included all of my immediate family and our spouses. “The exchange rate is so good right now that you can eat steak and lobster every night,” he continued.

He passed around brochures for Rosarito, Mexico, replete with stunning views of the ocean and highlighting a full range of activities. The one that caught Terrie’s and my attention was horseback riding. The picture showed a lady with long, flowing hair galloping across the beach on a beautiful horse. We determined right then that horseback

riding was the activity for us, and we eagerly planned and packed for this vacation.

Let's just say Rosarito was not what we had anticipated—not what the pamphlets had pictured at all. First, our hotel was not the one in the brochure. It wasn't even in the same neighborhood. Second, although the exchange rate was good, the prices were set for tourists. No steak and lobster for us.

One day on this trip, we saw a burro with white zebra stripes painted on it harnessed to a wooden cart. There was a sign that said, "Color pictures \$5." Danielle was a baby at the time, and we decided it would be fun to have a family picture on a cart behind the zebra-burro. I paid, we got in the cart, and all smiled for the picture. The man who owned the burro developed it right there and gave it to us—a black and white print.

"But I thought this was supposed to be a color picture," I said.

"Sí, Señor, it *is* color—*black* and *white*."

This trip wasn't turning out to be quite what we envisioned. We balanced our disappointment, however, by reminding ourselves that at least we could go horseback riding on the beach.

We left bright and early the next morning with visions of ourselves, brilliantly printed in our minds, galloping across the beach on princely horses. When we arrived at

the place advertised for horse rentals, we found a limited selection of horses—two. Terrie's horse had only one eye. My horse was well past his retirement years and had to be led. To make matters worse, we couldn't seem to get the boy leading it to understand we wanted to go to the beach. He led us through the streets of Rosarito where his friends surrounded us, asking for money.

When we finally got back to our hotel, we looked again at the picture of the lady galloping across the beach. Apparently that horse had already been rented by the time we arrived. Or maybe it was just a photo prop.

We are wiser now to travel brochures. A photographer can capture a small snapshot that is wildly different from the full experience.

And so it is in marriage. We see snapshots of marriage in other people's lives, on social media, and in culture. From these, we build our own expectations. But we soon discover that our mental images are vastly different from reality.

EXPECTATIONS RUIN RELATIONSHIPS

Sometimes the collision between our expectations and reality may be humorous—at least in hindsight. One of Terrie's early, unspoken expectations of marriage was that I would help around the house. Shortly after we were married, we had invited company over for dinner. I noticed she was

stressed with the preparations, and I offered to help. I was pleased with how delighted she was at my offer and silently congratulated myself on my sensitivity and kindness.

Then I rolled up my sleeves and tackled what looked to me like the biggest project—alphabetizing the bookshelf.

Although we both laugh at that incident now, it didn't strike Terrie as funny then. But it was one of our early discoveries of how easily expectations collide in marriage.

It is expectations and misunderstandings like these that set couples up for an ongoing stream of disappointment. In marriage counseling, we almost always find that marital disappointment comes from unrealistic, and often unspoken, expectations spouses have of one another.

We come to marriage with more expectations than we realize—cultural, familial, relational.... There are 1,001 influences from the time we are born until this present moment that shape our perspectives and underlying expectations. Expectations, in fact, are so deeply embedded into our worldview that we rarely consider them as being a topic of discussion. We simply assume everyone else looks at the world just as we do.

Of course, not all expectations are wrong or unreasonable. Marriage itself is built on the expectation that your spouse will honor his or her vows to you. You *want* your spouse to expect that you love and care for him or her. Together, you expect your marriage will grow and

that you are both fully committed to it. It's also not wrong to expect that your spouse will follow through on promises or to make promises you want your spouse to believe.

What we're speaking about here are expectations that are built on a spirit of pride or self-thought. They are often unspoken, and they are sometimes unidentified, even when they are our own. If we don't recognize them, we will become embittered toward our spouse because of them.

We see unmet expectations throughout Scripture. Sometimes they were false expectations of God and sometimes unrealistic expectations of others. The psalmist Asaph expected that ungodly people should not experience wealth while he served God and struggled. When his expectations were not met, he almost lost his faith (Psalm 73:1–17). Rachel expected she would have children and blamed her husband Jacob when she didn't (Genesis 30:1). The workers in Jesus' parable expected they would be compensated above what they had been promised. When they weren't, they nursed a grudge (Matthew 20:10–11).

One of the classic accounts of misplaced expectations is in 2 Kings 5 where we find the Syrian captain, Naaman, going to the prophet Elisha to be healed of leprosy. Naaman arrived at Elisha's doorstep with a large entourage, but Elisha simply sent his servant to the door with instructions for Naaman to dip seven times into the muddy Jordan River. Naaman was offended, and he left Elisha's house "in a rage"

(anger is a classic indicator of unmet expectations). Notice Naaman's response.

But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.—2 KINGS 5:11–12

Naaman came to Elisha with a full set of unspoken expectations. He expected Elisha would come to him in person, perform an elaborate ceremony, and bring on-the-spot healing. When this didn't happen, Naaman's disappointment turned into anger. It was only the persuasion of Naaman's servants that brought Naaman around to the place where he was willing to let his expectations go and humbly do as the prophet had told him. (And just to not leave you hanging, Naaman did then experience the miraculous healing of God.)

But think about Naaman's initial response: "*Behold, I thought...*" When you hear yourself say, "But I just thought..." that's your clue that you're dealing with unmet expectations. And when you feel the frustration and anger

rising, that is another indication that you are responding to unmet expectations.

I've heard many unrealistic expectations over the years. They usually begin with the phrase, "But I thought...." Here are several of the most common:

- **But I thought marriage would make me happy.** It is easy, especially for people who are not yet married or who are struggling in their marriage, to turn marriage into a personal idol, believing that the "perfect spouse" is the answer to any unhappiness in life. This expectation places an incredible pressure on a spouse. No spouse is perfect, and no person can be your single source of happiness. Only Jesus can give you continuing happiness.

Over the past couple of years, a few people have mentioned to me the big smile and evident joy of one of the ladies who sings in our church choir. What they don't know is that her husband is a Muslim, and that her heart is broken for his salvation. She longs to see him saved and to enjoy spiritual unity as a couple. Yet, even so, she has found her joy in the Lord. Marriage is an awesome gift, but it is not a place to depend on for your happiness.

- **But I thought my spouse would meet all of my needs.** Focusing on your needs can only ruin a marriage.

Every husband has unique needs, as does every wife. Ephesians 5 speaks to the individual nature of each spouse's needs as it commands wives to honor their husbands and husbands to love their wives. But don't miss the obvious—the command to each spouse is to meet the other's needs, not to focus on his or her own needs.

- **But I thought he/she would change after we got married.** Someone once pointed out that a man marries a woman expecting her to never change, and a woman marries a man expecting to change him—and they are both wrong!

Marrying someone with the expectation they will become a different person after marriage is unreasonable and unfair. Marriage is not a magic change agent that transforms a person. Before you are married, your job is to be sure the person you want to marry is someone you can trust. After marriage, your job is to work to understand and love the person you married.

- **But I thought if I found the right one, marriage would be easy.** Good marriages take effort. It requires real work to understand your spouse and honor and love him or her. A spouse who is passionate about a

strong marriage thinks about his or her spouse often and constantly invests in the relationship.

- **But I thought good marriages never struggle.** Actually, most marriages will “hit a wall.” Sometimes a couple is surprised by a season of difficulty in their marriage. This faulty expectation leads them to assume then that their marriage is already as good as gone. If, when you encounter such a season, you recognize that every difficulty can be worked through with the grace of God, biblical truth (perhaps including wise counsel), and a determination to strengthen your relationship, you’ll get through it—and be stronger for it.

Do you see your thoughts in any of those expectations? If you were to finish this sentence, “But I just thought that he/she would _____,” how would you fill in the blank?

THE DOWNHILL PATH TO HAPPINESS

Our flesh tells us that the only way our unfulfilled expectations can be overcome is if our spouse will change and turn those expectations into fulfilled desires. Scripture tells us there is another way.

The journey to happiness in marriage is not one of insisting that your spouse change. It is in learning to change your thoughts by letting the mind of Christ become yours.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

—PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

These words are convicting to me every time I read them. Interestingly, they come directly after verses about relational unity: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:3–4).

If you were to take this passage at absolute face value, how do you think it would transform your marriage?

Jesus came to earth with *only* an expectation to serve and sacrifice for others. “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus had no

hidden agenda—no “If I serve them, they’ll do _____ for me” mentality.

Jesus’ humility is a rebuke to our self-centered thought patterns. If you want to transform your thinking toward your spouse, saturate your mind with Philippians 2:3–8. Read it daily. Think on it. Memorize it. Write it out. Let it reprogram your mind from one of expectancy to Christlikeness.

THREE DOWNWARD STEPS TO TAKE EVERY DAY

Our shift in expectations initially takes place in our minds. But at some point, we must take action steps toward our spouse if we are to shift from expecting to serving.

So, what does Philippians 2 living look like in everyday terms? Here are three actions Terrie and I endeavor to take daily:

1. Die to self. When we trust Christ as our Saviour, He gives us a new nature. Second Corinthians 5:17 promises, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

But the habits of our hearts and the temptations of life don’t vanish overnight. The Bible calls this continuing pull toward sin “the flesh.” *The flesh* is my tendency to satisfy my needs or desires outside the obedience of God. Galatians 5:17 explains, “For the flesh lusteth against

the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.”

Even as a Christian with the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, I have a terrible tendency to build expectations of what Terrie should do or be for me with myself at the center of them. When I say, “I just thought she would understand my need for _____,” that’s usually an indication of selfishness. And pride. And discontent. And.... In short, it’s fleshliness.

Here’s the thing about the flesh: you can’t reform it. You can’t just “try harder” to have less expectations or to be less selfish. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). He wasn’t saying that he physically died and miraculously resurrected every day; he was teaching us that the only way to overcome the flesh is to kill it.

In Galatians 2:20, which has become my life verse, Paul expounds on this truth: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

This verse echoes a truth that shows up throughout the entire New Testament: as believers, we are “in Christ.” The Christian life was never designed to simply be a “get out of hell free” card; it is to be a life of union with Jesus.

Our spiritual relationship to God is that we have the righteousness of Jesus and the ability to allow the life of Jesus to live through us.

But it requires that we choose to die to our fleshly tendencies and desires. Romans 6:11 assures us that as Christians we have the power to do this: “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

For me, this dying to self process begins every day as I pray something like this: “Lord, today I die to self. I reckon myself—my tendencies, habits, and selfish expectations—dead because of Your cross and because I am ‘in You.’ I ask You to live through me—that Your power and truth would dominate my heart and that Your Spirit would guide me today.”

I don’t recite these words as a memorized prayer every day. But I do make a conscious decision every day to die to self and surrender to let Christ live through me. Sometimes I simply pray the words of Galatians 2:20.

A prayer like this cannot and does not obliterate the temptations that would arise during the day, but it does set my heart in the right direction and prepare me to yield to the Holy Spirit during those in-the-moment temptations to selfishness that will arise all day long.

2. Yield to the Holy Spirit. It is 2:00 in the afternoon, and your wife has asked you *again* if you’ve heard back on

any of the job applications you submitted yesterday. Last time she asked, you told her you'd let her know as soon as you did, which is a pretty clear way of saying, "Please don't ask again." You would expect she would understand that, right?

What do you do in that moment? You could respond in the flesh, which, depending on your personality, may involve anything from raising your voice with an exasperated, cutting answer, to giving the silent treatment, to an all-out shouting fight; or you could, in that moment, listen to the Holy Spirit encouraging you to die to self and give grace.

One of the unique dynamics of the Christian life is that it cannot work without the power of God. The Christian life was never meant to be lived in your own strength, but by the empowering of the Holy Spirit who lives within you. It is no coincidence that the scriptural command to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18) is the prelude to some of the most direct marriage counsel in the Bible (Ephesians 5:22–33, which we will look at in our next chapter). Being filled with the Spirit is simply the act of surrender to God. It is a decision of faith to yield control of yourself to the Holy Spirit and to the commands of His Word.

Without allowing the Holy Spirit to fill, or to control, your life, your days will be controlled by false expectations

and fleshly responses. In stark contrast, the result of being filled with the Spirit is a set of qualities every Christian couple wants to characterize their lives and their marriage: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22–23).

We think that if we yield our rights and surrender our expectations to God, we’ll be trampled on, made a doormat, be taken advantage of, and lose our identity. But read that list describing the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5 again: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. Could you use those qualities in your marriage? It’s a matter of yielding.

3. *Serve your spouse.* The only Christlike expectation is the expectation to serve. Think again of Philippians 2 and Christ’s humility. Jesus had every right to expect to *be served*. But He chose instead to serve.

The most practical step you can take to curb unrealistic expectations is to purposefully serve your spouse without expecting anything in return. Look for real, tangible, specific ways to meet your spouse’s needs.

The world conditions us to expect. Glossy advertising, consumer-driven marketing, resorts, amusement parks... they all say, “You deserve more; let us give it to you.” Yet the world consistently underperforms. The higher our

expectations, the less satisfied reality becomes. Only a servant will be pleasantly surprised.

Several years ago, Terrie and I were in Italy with our son and daughter-in-law, Larry and Ashley, and Ashley's parents, Ernie and Lori Baydo. Larry had just been through two major surgeries followed by months of chemo treatments for cancer. Toward the outset of Larry's treatments, I had told him once he got through them, we would go anywhere he would like together. Larry had been studying the life of Paul and wanted an opportunity to travel to the locations where he was used of God to preach the gospel, especially Mars Hill in Athens. While in that part of the world, we took a mini tour tracing the footsteps of the apostle Paul throughout the Mediterranean region. This trip became one of the most enriching trips for all of us relating to Bible study and teaching and preaching.

At one point on this trip, we were at a restaurant in Milan, Italy, and really up against the clock to catch a train to our next destination. When I told the waiter that we were in a hurry and needed our food quickly, he responded with a phrase that indicated his desire to help. His words became our motto for the rest of the trip and a favorite saying in our family since: "I want to make you happy."

What could happen in your marriage if you adopted this phrase as your motto? "I want to make you happy."

What if, instead of expecting to be made happy, you made it your number one desire to make your spouse happy? Have you given thought to what your spouse's needs are? Are you willing to set aside your own needs and expectations to meet those?

In the excellent book *His Needs, Her Needs*, author Willard Harley, Jr.¹ highlights five semi-corresponding needs of husbands and wives that he has discovered through extensive counseling:

His Needs	Her Needs
Sexual Fulfillment	Affection
Recreational Companionship	Intimate Conversation
Physical Attractiveness	Honesty and Openness
Domestic Support	Financial Support
Admiration	Family Commitment

Remember that Christlike servanthood isn't serving with the expectation of getting. (*If I make his favorite meal, he will become more verbally communicative. If I buy her flowers, she will be more physically responsive.*) It's not manipulative. It is serving with the expectation of serving. That's it.

How do you know what your spouse's needs are? Getting to know your spouse and learning to anticipate his or her needs is one way. Another is to simply ask, "What

can I do today to help you?” In fact, that is a tremendous question to ask every day.

LOVE IS A CHOICE

If you remain married for longer than five minutes, you will experience unmet expectations. It’s part of life, and it’s definitely part of marriage.

The world conditions us to believe that love is fueled by a spouse being “everything I ever dreamed.” When we discover our spouse is *not* everything we dreamed (and no spouse is), we have two choices: we can become disillusioned, or we can choose to love unconditionally and serve sacrificially.

The feeling of being “in love” comes easily when all of my expectations are being met. But true love, selfless love, requires the hard work of discovering what my wife needs, selflessly serving her, and having the personal discipline and commitment to do that again and again and again.

This is the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

*Beareth all things, believeth all things,
hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

This kind of love involves real choices. It wasn't hard when I was dating Terrie to be late for work because time got away from me while we were spending googly-eyed hours together. (Neither was it hard for my employer to suggest he would let me go if it happened again.) But, I'll be honest, after we were married and Terrie was in bed sick, I did find it hard to do the dishes. Yet, doing the dishes was more loving than staring into each other's eyes. The first was a self-satisfying love; the second was self-sacrificing love. The first was immaturity; the second grew our relationship.

Choosing to serve has a powerful way of releasing our expectations. But it gets even better. It positions us for grace. I don't know of any Christian spouse who wouldn't agree that what their marriage needs more than anything is God's grace. It's what Terrie and I constantly need. It's what you need. And it comes through humility—the humility that submits and serves: "...Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Is choosing to serve when you don't "feel" love a sterile way to live? Is it dead love? Empty of meaning? Not

at all. Because service begins with sacrifice, it makes room for the deepest feelings imaginable.

It is servant-based love that allows you to look back at the self-centered picture you originally had of marriage and laugh. For one, you realize that marriage isn't a ready-made photograph. It is a picture that you paint together—day by day, choice by choice, with brushstrokes of service.

And *this* picture—the one that you paint together—turns out to be even better than the travel brochure snapshot you had in your mind. It's real. And it's painted with grace.



Hikers have the right of way



(above) Terrie with the one-eyed horse



(left) In Milan, Italy, waiting for our “I want to make you happy” server