Healthy Habits in Marriage:

"This is my beloved and this is my friend…"
Song of Solomon 1:16b

Happy and enduring marriages do not come about by accident or the happenstance of two "perfect people" finding each other. Every marriage consists of two sinners taking a step of faith to obey God by pledging themselves to a lifelong relationship in obedience to God's command and according to His design. We have discussed the fundamentals of love, service, forgiveness, and healthy communication. Now we'll examine healthy habits of marriage. Happy and enduring marriages have certain healthy habits engrained into the relationship. These habits are Christ-honoring and friendship oriented. Every happy marriage is at its base a growing Christ-centered friendship – two people that enjoy being together and sharing the experiences of life. These habits are basic, but they will cut through the daily craziness and produce life-giving Christ honoring friendship year after year.

Date Night: It's essential to date your spouse. So much time, money, planning, and thoughtfulness is put into dating before marriage, and often this falls off soon after marriage. Dating your spouse is an essential part of building your friendship with them. Dating your spouse involves regular creative planning and investment in your friendship. Dating builds memories and happy shared experiences. Dating gives unhurried time to talk over good food, enjoy a concert, or explore a fun place. Couples that date each other enjoy each other!

I encourage you to strive to date each other weekly. If your busy life is like mine, striving for a once-a-week date will result in twice a month. If you strive for twice a month, you'll end up with once a month, which is not enough time together. These times don't have to be expensive, but should be conversation-oriented and not part of your normal daily routine; dinner out, coffee shop, walk in the park, ice cream, etc… You can spend time getting busy calendars straightened out, getting on the same page about life goals, talking about the spiritual growth of your children, planning a future trip, working out disagreements that need substantial conversation. I encourage you to silence your phones and give your spouse your undivided attention.

Weekly Church: Attending church together each week with your spouse brings you together with them to worship and opens your heart to hear from the Lord. As you come to church together week after week, the Lord will bring spiritual formation to your lives *together*. You will learn together, worship together, pray together, be convicted together, make friends together, and grow together. Clearing the calendar for church each week also opens the door for other Sunday traditions and habits that are joyful, friendship building, and Christ-honoring. Keeping the sabbath holy involves intentionally choosing to rest and focus on Jesus one day in seven. This intentionally quiet day allows for family meals, naps, walks, reading, and memories.

Extended Time Alone: It's essential that at least once or twice per year every married couple carve out extended time alone for just the couple – no kids or other family. This can come in many different forms, but every form says, "I love you, want to spend time with you, and I'm willing to invest time and money in our marriage and friendship." In varying degrees this can be just a night away together in a different town or a special trip away for a few days. I

strongly suggest that every few years you go to a marriage conference. Marriage conferences are best to help tune-up your marriage, rather than waiting until there is a major problem looking for a quick fix. For special anniversaries, work to get away and make the time as special as possible. Life will always work against you but fight to celebrate the special relationship of your marriage.

Self-care and personal growth: The above three healthy habits relate to the couple together. This last habit relates to the marriage partners as individuals. Marriages that happily endure through the years are made up of two individuals that never stop growing as individuals. Human beings have an incredible ability to continue growing in mental, physical, and spiritual capacity throughout their lives. A big part of the joy of friendship is discovering new things about another person and supporting another person as they pursue meaningful pursuits. When two people stop growing and stop pursuing meaningful personal goals, the marriage will stagnate. This personal growth relates to self-care and personal growth goals. When people first meet, there is an emphasis on self-care and putting a good foot forward. Early in the relationship personal goals bring people together in joint life-pursuit. These ends must endure after decades of marriage.

Both husband and wife must continue to care about their personal appearance and growing as an individual. Sometimes these personal healthy habits can get lost in caring for children, aging parents, or the pressure of work and providing for a family. If these things lose focus in your marriage, refer back to date night! Personal goals in these areas are an important subject to talk about in a mutually supportive and encouraging way. When it comes to the friendship of marriage you are each helping the other to grow as a healthy person and achieve their goals.

In my personal experience, I have never known a couple that practiced these habits that did not have a healthy marriage. Conversely, every couple I know that neglects these habits has a weak and struggling marriage. I urge you to pursue these habits. Pursue friendship with your spouse. Pursue intimacy with your spouse. Build healthy habits into your relationship that will build up a bank of good memories and strength in your marriage that can be drawn upon during darker days of hardship.

May the Lord bless the marriages in our church and help us love each other as we ought to,
Pastor Vic