

We all approach marriage with a picture of how it is going to be. Even if you are single you have already begun to imagine what marriage should look like: She will submit. He will submit. We'll save money. We'll spend money. We will spend our discretionary time together. I need my space and friends. Christmas is at my mom's with all my aunts, uncles, and cousins ...

At the center of all this is "I." I imagine. I desire. I have always thought. I expect. We have drawn a picture of marriage designed for me and by me. Bottom line, we have agendas for the people we are marrying. And wouldn't you know it, your spouse also has an agenda and a set of expectations as well. They have an "I."

Eventually the I's collide, and we all react in one of four ways ...

1. Leave

"This is not what I thought it would be." The problem with this option is that we take "I" with us. We just move on and dump our expectations on someone else.

2. Conquer

We try to change our spouses. This is an attempt to get "her" or "him" to be "I."

3. Conform

When we conform we try to become somebody we are not. "I won't be 'I,' I'll be 'him' or 'her.'" On the surface things look good. But eventually, the truth surfaces and somebody is taken by complete surprise.

4. Compromise

This works great for a while. However, compromise is still about "I." "I will as long as you will." "Didn't we do it your way last time?" Compromise leads to scorekeeping and it kills intimacy. It is really another way to be committed to "I" because I want MY marriage to work out.

While there are areas in your marriage where compromise is important, at some point you should move beyond compromise as a way of dealing with your differences.

Expectations over time will transform your marriage from a covenant relationship to a debt/debtor relationship. This is because of what expectations communicate: You owe me. Expectations reflect what you feel like you deserve. These may be very realistic expectations, but they ultimately lead to disappointment. I didn't get what I deserved. You didn't deliver what you owed me. Eventually you begin to move into a bargaining approach in order to manage expectations, but this impedes our ability to love. You see, an expectation is a request for something, while love is the gift of something. We end up in a tug-of-war that destroys intimacy and romance.

But the thing is, behind you and your spouse's expectations is a legitimate God-given desire. Everyone was born with desires. We desire to be cherished. We desire companionship. We desire acceptance. But when you take a legitimate desire and place it on the shoulders of your spouse it feels like an expectation. She owes me. And then when he gives you what you expect, are you grateful? Not at all! Wives are supposed to keep the house straight. Husbands are supposed to be the providers. It is this transfer that turns the covenant into a contract. There goes the love. Bring out the gloves.

So how do you keep good God-given desires from becoming harmful de-motivating expectations? How do you take an expectation and put it back into the category of a desire? How do I get "I" out of the middle of the relationship? You have to answer one foundational question. What does your spouse owe you? The answer to that question will pinpoint your expectations.

Many of us walked up to the altar with desires and walked out the door of the church with expectations. To experience what God had in mind, you've got to take things out of the expectation box and put them back in the desire box. But watch out. The thing that will keep you from doing that is "I." *"I'm" afraid he/she will ... "I" won't get what "I" need. "I" may not be happy.* If you can get beyond the "I" in marriage, you can move things out of the expectation box and back into the desire box.

How do I know if my desires have become expectations?

1. Frequency or Infrequency of Expressions of Gratitude
2. Acts of Service

What does my spouse owe me?

Reflection Questions

1. How have things like TV, books, magazines, your parent's marriages or other people's marriages affected your expectations in marriage?
2. Have you ever felt like you just couldn't measure up – that you just couldn't meet the expectations you felt were placed upon you? How does this affect your relationship?
3. Have you ever tried to make your spouse more like you? What message does this send to your spouse?
4. Are you committed to your marriage or to your spouse?
5. How do you express appreciation to your spouse? Are you regularly showing gratitude to one another?
6. What do you do to serve your spouse in practical ways?
7. What do you feel that your spouse owes you?
8. If you could change your expectations back to desire, how would it change the way you respond to your spouse?
9. What would it look like to convey unconditional love instead of your unspoken expectations?
10. How has being free from obligation to God changed your life? How might being free from obligation in marriage affect your relationship with your spouse?

“Be good wives to your husbands, responsive to their needs.
There are husbands who, indifferent as they are to any words about God,
will be captivated by your life of holy beauty.”

1 Peter 3:1-2 (MSG)

“In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard.”

1 Peter 3:7 (NLT)