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“Avoiding Bad Partnerships”
September 1, 2016

Over the years, I have had the privilege as a pastor to enter into many personal conversations. People have shared with me their hurts, their concerns, their struggles, and their doubts. A fair share of these conversations include something about one’s marriage, something about the partnership that for a married person probably affects their well-being more than any other.

In those discussions, when the strain of a marriage is exposed, sometimes what is recognized is a communication glitch between the spouses. They simply aren’t listening well to one another and are not on the same page. Or perhaps at times there is a need in some particular situation for one person to yield to the other in a decision or to forgive someone of a past wrong doing. But sometimes those kinds of issues are not the problem. Sometimes the problem is much deeper. And in those instances, it is not uncommon for one person to want to work out things for the better and the other person to have a whole other agenda. In this latter case, I suppose what surprises me most is that the person that really isn’t interested in seeing the relationship move forward has often been in that place from the beginning. He or she was on another page before the wedding vows were even made. But if that’s the case, then why did the first party marry the other? Why couldn’t she see the problem right up front? What kept him from seeing that this was a partnership that was going to have a hard time working.

I share this with you as an illustration of entering into a partnership thinking that it would be good only to find out later that it would be a great struggle. This does not just happen in the realm of marriage. It happens in business when we enter into relationships with people who looked very promising only to find that their ability to perform or to do so in a way that matches our values is far less than expected. It happens in the church world when a ministry leader is hired with great expectations only to find that he or she is not on the same page with the church in many regards.

But why does this happen? How do we find ourselves in what we might call bad partnerships? We don't aim to hire or elect or marry those who prove problematic. That's not what we are after. And yet it still happens. We don't get what we think we signed up for. The relationship we thought would bring about something very positive has proven to do the very opposite.

Now, I don't pretend to think there is a one size fits all reason for why this happens. But I do want to suggest one reason—a reason that I think accounts for at least a good number of the bad partnerships we find ourselves in. And it has to do with the vetting process. It has to do with what impresses us before the relationship is even entered into. The criteria we use to make our decision. I tend to think that in many cases when a partnership has gone south the up-front criteria was not what it should have been. We simply had our eyes on the wrong thing?

There is a classic example of this found in the Bible. The nation of Israel for its first many centuries of existence was led by a series of God appointed "judges." These judges were largely called upon by God to deliver the Israelites from enemies and were not really about governing the people on a day to day basis. But in time the Israelites became a bit dissatisfied with this arrangement. The nations around them had kings, and they thought the same would work best for them. God told them that having a king wasn't all it was cracked up to be, but if they wanted one they could have one.

So the vetting process for a king begins. At that point in the biblical story, a man named Saul shows up on the scene. He does not have any real credentials. He has no real leadership experience. But he was tall. That's right, he was tall. Twice the Bible tells us he was a head taller than anyone else, a curious fact given that the Bible does not generally provide a physical description of Israel's leader. But it seems to tell us this fact, because this is what the people were impressed by. They were impressed by Saul's physical stature and wanted him to be their king.

Now, as you might guess Saul ended up being a disaster of a king. Being tall might be a great thing, but it says nothing about one's ability to lead. And it certainly said nothing about Saul's ability to lead. The

people in entering into this partnership made a grave mistake, and they made it because their eyes were on the wrong thing.

You might consider this biblical example as something akin to an ancient Aesop's fable—a nice reminder to children that we should not make judgments on outward appearance. But don't be so fast to relegate this lesson to children. What if I were to tell you that less than 15% of American men are over six feet tall, yet nearly 60% of corporate CEOs measure over 6 foot? Or what if I told you that about 4% of American men are over 6'2", but more than 36% of corporate CEO's are over that height? Does that seem a bit out of whack to you? I truly doubt that most boards would say that what they are looking for in their next leader is someone in excess of 6', or 6'2". And yet it happens way too often to suggest that somehow height isn't playing into their decision.¹

So you see, we might look back to ancient Israel and belittle their decision to endorse a man as king because of his physical stature, but the numbers tell us we are still doing the same today. We still, whether we recognize it or not, give credence to factors that really say nothing about how one might actually perform, whether that factor be height or something else. One Queensland University study even indicates that companies pay blond women 7% more than brunettes or redheads.²

If you follow college football you have heard of the NFL combine. Before college players are drafted they are invited to be part of an exhibition of sorts. It's called the combine. They run, they lift weights, they jump, they take psychological tests. The media tells us how everyone has done and hypes up or degrades players on how they did at the combine. And yet a rather exhaustive study has shown there is virtually no correlation between how one performs at the combine and how one succeeds in the NFL.³ Like it or not, the combine is all about appearances. And if teams bite based on what they see during that exhibition, they are likely to be disappointed. They will find themselves entering bad partnerships more than their fair share of the time.

Or consider this example; it is a very disturbing one. It has to do with hiring in the business context. As part of a study conducted by MIT and the University of Chicago, 5,000 resumes were sent to hiring managers for advertised positions. Each manager received four resumes, two with

names that are typically associated with white people and two with names typically associated with black people. Each pair involved a job applicant with average credentials, while the other had above average credentials. What were the results of the study? Those with typically white names received a call back 51% more often. Even average resumes with white names received more calls backs than above average resumes with black names.⁴ My guess is that if you interviewed the hiring managers, there would be no signs of racism. They likely were even hoping to hire minorities, and yet they found themselves pursuing employment partnerships not based on skill or experience but based on skin color.

I wonder what would happen if you and I were able to look back with clarity at the partnerships we have formed, whether they have to do with marriage or friendship or employment or organizational leadership. And what if we really put our eyes on the partnerships that did not work out well. I wonder if what we would find is that when we vetted those relationships, we had our eye on rather superficial matters. Instead of being influenced by experience or skill or character, we were instead drawn in by things as superficial as how tall a person measured, how high someone could jump, the color of her hair, or whether he had a majority skin color?

Lately, I have found myself more and more intrigued by one of Jesus' early ministry scenes. It's a scene in which we find him traveling through Samaria with his disciples. If you do not know, Jews like Jesus generally despised Samaritans. They thought of them as spiritual reprobates and more often than not would avoid the region in which they lived. Jesus wanted to teach his disciples a lesson, however, and he travels right into the heart of Samaria. And when he gets there he speaks to a woman, a woman who already had five husbands, and was now living with a sixth man. Now if you were Jesus' agent, I am quite sure you would be advising him otherwise at this point. Heading into Samaria and speaking to a woman with a scandalous past is hardly the way to build up your ministry resume in the first century. But Jesus didn't see things that way. He looked beyond the superficial. He saw this as a place of great ministry potential. He called it a place ripe for harvest.

Not long after Jesus speaks to the woman his disciples show up on the scene. They, like my hypothetical ministry agent, were not too pleased with this ministry setting. They saw no hope for these Samaritan people. But they couldn't have been more wrong. That sordid woman? She gets herself right with God. And the village she is from? Many of them do too. And so Jesus let's his disciples have it. He tells them their eyes are on the wrong things. They are looking at the superficial. They are looking at things that might look impressive on the outside or are in sync with the majority view, but speak nothing as to another's worthiness or potential for positive partnership.

When I consider this story, and our own propensity to be wooed into partnerships by characteristics that don't really amount to much, it seems we could all use a little more of Jesus' perspective. When we enter into partnerships whether it is for relational purposes or business aims, we would do well to push ourselves beyond outward appearance. We need to get past the glitter and look at the substance. We need to get past what sells on magazine covers and look for what builds solid, trustworthy relationships. We need to look for signs of true potential. We need to remember that sometimes the best partnerships are with people who come in rather unassuming packages and that the worst ones can be avoided if we don't use measures that having nothing to do with success.

¹ Howard Ross, "[Exploring Unconscious Bias](#)," *CDO Insights*, August 2008, p. 1

² Nick Collins, "[Blonds Paid More than Other Women](#)," *The Telegraph*, April 4, 2010.

³ Frank E. Kuzmits and Arthur J. Adams, "[The NFL Combine: Does It Predict Performance in the National Football League?](#)" *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, November 2008

⁴ Horace McCormack, "[The Real Effects of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace](#)," UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School, 2015, p. 4.