



# Help with Marital Communication

Communication in marriage is never easy, despite the fact that if there was ever anyone we should be able to talk intimately with, it should be our spouse. It was probably that very thing that convinced us that this was the one for us; I can talk to him/her all day long and they understand me. You could talk to each other all day because you were genuinely interested in finding out who this other person was. In the words of a recent country song by Toby Keith, your sweetie wanted you to find out, "... what I think, what I like, what I want, what I know."

As we have worked with couples, and as we have found in our own marriage, there are times when we need a little help; a little push; a little redirection; to make things work more like they ought to. Perhaps the following will be of benefit to you.

We seemingly enter marriage on a different plane than any other commitment we make; with a great deal of presumption, reinforced by idealism. For instance; we will go to school for 12 years; go to college for at least 4 more; perhaps even a tech school or get an advanced degree, after that; get a license or certification in some career field or specialty, take continuing education courses to keep the license current and attend seminars, trade shows and conventions to keep our skills sharp.

But when it comes to marriage, the most complex, intimate relationship of our lives, it's a completely different story. All we'll do is take a blood test. For which we don't study. We'll pay for a marriage license that costs about the same as an annual fishing license with a trout stamp. After the honeymoon we never do another thing about the most important relationship on the planet. Is that an indicator of our commitment to our spouse or the importance with which we view our relationship? There is no way we would perceive it as so. And yet that's precisely what happens. This is in spit of the fact that we'll generally marry our exact opposite in every way. Perhaps we'll attend a marriage retreat once in a blue moon, if we have time, and it's not too expensive and we sure don't want to look stupid participating in some skit. Now that's commitment for you!

The odd thing about marriage is that we never have any idea how every other couple is doing. We have no idea what goes on behind closed doors. But we assume that whatever it is, they're doing it better than we are; better communication; better financial management; better sex; certainly no arguments; perfect relationships; you name it. The sad part is those same couples that we think "have it all together" are looking us thinking the same things we are about them.

There comes a time in every marriage when conflict arises, somehow there doesn't seem to be any way to resolve it, despite all the hints, the messages, the word picture drawn or the emotions shared. It happens in every relationship. What also happens is that when we can't seem to be able to communicate in some particular area, the whole thing begins to go down hill; finally devolving into giving more credence to body language than the body is capable of speaking. The old adage of a picture being worth a thousand words definitely doesn't apply here! That's because the only thing body language usually conveys is generally short and very negative.

Everyone has been there. Perhaps you still are. It is the place where unresolved conflict is placed "on-hold" and we try to convey more of how we feel through heavy sighs, a turn of the head, a groan, a grimace, a way of walking, a tone of voice or a pet phrase that sums it all up. In time, we find that the number of unresolved issues grows larger and our dissatisfaction



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with the relationship increases. This doesn't mean we're through, but you find that you don't laugh as much as you used to, don't talk like you used to, sex isn't what it used to be and neither is satisfaction with life. All because our mate can't seem to hear what our heart needs to convey and we're no longer sure they care.

Then there's the flip side ... we never argue. For 20 years that was our gig. We just stuffed it. The only real way for that to work is for each to "tune the other out" emotionally. Let me tell you, that leads to some "interesting" intimacy on all kinds of levels. The difficulty is that Christians view arguments inside of marriage as shameful and immature. Nobody wants to talk about that! Which of us has never had a disagreement on the way to church? (The one who raises his hand will get six free weeks of counseling on honesty.) Surely, other mature believers don't struggle with this! There is a Greek word for it and it's translated as, "baloney"!

Christians see marriage somewhat ideally. We somehow believe it should be conflict free. Anything else is inconsistent with romantic love, our vows to one another, our commitment to each other and to Christ, not to mention basic spiritual maturity. If it does happen we begin to question everything, including, "were we really ever right for each other to begin with?"

I can't tell you how many couples are dealing with the same thing – basic communication. Some have all but given up. Still others want to come to prayer counseling with us so they can prove to themselves they've done everything they could do before calling it quits. They are all frustrated and don't know quite what to do. They'd read a book if they knew which one. And yet somehow the thought of going to a marriage retreat or encounter is not on the radar. If it is, only one is willing. So what's to be done?

## Love demands a sacrifice

One of the first keys to bringing sanity back into a relationship is understanding that love demands a sacrifice. The basis for all conflict in marriage is that we all need to know that we are loved, and one spouse, or both, will not die to themselves and their wants and expectations for the sake of the other, and thereby prove their love. So we resort to a series of bizarre means and methods for trying to get our needs met by our spouse, and thereby forcing him/her to finally prove their love for us.

The Bible states that men are to love their wives (Eph 5:25 and Col 3:19) and give them honor (1 Peter 3:7); wives are to love their husbands (Titus 2:4) and submit to them (Col 3:18). Men! Any woman will readily submit to a man who continually honors her and has proven to her that he loves her by laying his life down for her. If the two of you are having problems the first question to ask is, "Am I only loving and honoring her when it is convenient for me? Am I laying down my life for her? Have I put her first in everything?" Romans 12:10 wasn't simply telling us how to deal with other Christians when it said, "Be kindly affectioned (cherish, fond of) one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another;"

What does the Bible Say?

The following scripture has helped to put things into perspective for a number of people:



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This section of scripture starts out in Ephesians 4:17 with, *“Now I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.”*

Do you realize that almost everything we do is sinful? The way you balance your checkbook; the way you make decisions; the way you process information; the way you learned to communicate? Why? Because it was taught to you by the world’s system, which is under the domination of the evil one. So we have a “gentile” (unsaved, unsanctified, unredeemed) way of dealing with everything. Paul is telling us not to think as the world thinks because it’s futile. It doesn’t work; can’t do what you want it to; isn’t profitable.

If Paul pointed out that the Gentiles (unredeemed) live in a way that doesn’t work, then there is a way in which to live that does work.

So in the balance of this scripture passage, Paul tells us how to live:

*“Therefore, putting away all falsehood, let everyone speak truth with his neighbor, because we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the Devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may give to those in need. Let not any evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and anger, and wrath, and clamor, and slander be put away from you, along with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God forgave you in Christ.*

*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, even as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.”* Ephesians 4:25-5:1 (RSV)

Some explanation is in order:

**Truth #1:** Ephesians 4:25 *“Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak truth with his neighbor;”*

What is “falsehood” in the scripture? It is usually seen as lies. One expression of it could be the “lack of truth”. One of the things that happens when communication goes down hill is the enemy comes to lie to you about what will happen if you dare tell the truth. One such lie is that, “If I tell them the truth, they’ll leave. They can’t take it.” So we say nothing. The enemy wants us to be intimidated by what we think the truth is. So by not saying anything, we actually risk destroying the relationship. If I’m unhappy in the relationship because I won’t tell the truth, do I actually think that will make my spouse happy.

What is the “truth”? It’s telling your mate what you need from them and how not getting it makes you feel. Typically, we get hurt and hint around at what hurt us; hoping they’ll get it; then apologize for it, then never do it again. Will that really make you feel better if they do? Probably not!

Picture a five year old walking up to his mom and stomping on her toe. Mom cries out in pain, hopping spastically around the kitchen holding her toe, while trying not to trip and break her nose. The child realizing that he’s responsible for his mom’s pain, says repeatedly, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” The agonized mom replies, “Yes, I know you’re sorry, but it still hurts!!!!!!”



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It's the same when we get wounded. An apology is nice, but it often doesn't touch the wound itself.

What we really want our spouse to say is, "I heard you. I know that I have wounded you, I'm sorry and I will take every precaution in the future not to do that again. Will you forgive me?" But in order to get that kind of response, we have to tell them the truth. "You hurt me and this is how. This is how it made me feel – You don't value you me. I need to know and be continuously made to feel that I'm important in your life. Now I want you to respond to me in a way that says you heard every word I said, acknowledging every emotion I expressed, and to reassure me that I'm important enough to you to do something about it."

Is that what we do? Oh, we may do it on occasion, particularly when we've become so frustrated that we can't take it anymore, thereby forcing a response. But those don't happen often enough for us to gain confidence over the lie that says, "They'll leave if I tell them the truth about what's bothering me." Consequently, we will never risk the relationship to establish a permanent level of intimate communication.

Some would say that this scripture says, "*let everyone speak truth with his neighbor*", not your spouse! Yes, but Genesis 2:24 says that you are "*one flesh*". We as believers have so much more available to us and our spouse that we and our neighbors do not share in. And yet, we are to speak the truth to them. How much more so to our spouse to whom we have pledged our very lives? See Ephesians 4:13-15.

In John 17:20 Jesus prays, "*I do not pray for these only (the 12 Disciples), but also for those who believe in me through their word (that's you and me), that they may all be one; even as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they may be in us ...*" You see, there is much more to the unity in a believer's relationship to a spouse than is apparent from the wedding vows alone. But if I'm not committed to speaking the truth to my mate about what I need, then I'm not going to be able to expect the full cooperation of the Spirit in helping gain the intimacy we both desire. The Holy Spirit is dedicated to producing unity between you and your spouse for it is an expression of the glory of God in the earth

Often what drives us to a non-communicative position is fear of conflict. Somehow we come to believe that living with unmet needs is preferable to another soul wracking argument. In doing so, we chose a slow emotional death. Consider the following;

*"A man's belly shall be satisfied with the fruit of his mouth; and with the increase of his lips shall he be filled. Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."* Proverbs 18:20-21

We are always drawn to verse 21, but forget that it falls on the heels of verse 20 which states that "we shall be satisfied with what we speak." If we chose to sit on our words and don't touch on what bothers us with our spouse nothing will ever change. The surest way to lose yourself as a person in the context of marriage is to never speak your mind and never expect your spouse to respond to you out of their love for you.

## What's At The Root?

I was having difficulty with a sin that I'd had been dealing with, off and on, all my life. Crying out to Jesus to, "Fix it!, Do something with it or to it! I can't do this any longer!" I had a picture



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of him coming to me and in spite of my knowledge of him, I rather expected him to wag his finger at me and scold me for it. Instead, he came up to me and put his arm around me.

Somehow surprised by his response, and by the fact that I was surprised that I was surprised, I told him so. A moment or two went by, then He asked me, "What else would I do?" Out of my performance oriented mind came, I knew that he was tempted in all areas just as I had (Hebrews 4:15), but yet he didn't give into it.

"Yes," he responded, "I wasn't afraid .... (strange phrase) ... because I had been perfectly loved – and I love perfectly. I had no fear that I was not loved or that love would ever be withheld from me."

Fear of not being loved is at the heart of all that drives us to do most of the dumb things we do. Most of our dysfunctional behavior is rooted in it. (I know mine is.) It is the source of all our coping mechanisms and the justification we use to medicate our pain. Not being loved, or more accurately, the fear of it, is at the heart of our performance.

Then the following scripture came to me; Hebrews 2:14-15 *"Forasmuch then as the children (God's) are partakers of flesh and blood, he (Jesus) also took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."*

1 John 4:18 *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear hath torment. He that fears is not made perfect in love."*

Jesus went on to say, "The greatest pain I had on earth was at my crucifixion, when love actually turned away from me for a time."

Folks, unlike Jesus, we'll do anything for love, or even for what we think is love. It was the lack of it, or our inability to receive it, that causes us to do strange things to earn that which should be given freely. It is our fear that it might happen again in marriage that stands between us and the greatest relationship on the planet.

Thanks be to God that we have His promise that He will never leave us, nor ever forsake us (Hebrews 3:15). So we never have to fear not being loved. Ever! We must no longer allow fear of not being loved, not being appreciated, or not being valued to be the driving force behind what we do, or do not do.

Ephesians 4:14-18 from the Message translation states:

*"No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love--like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do." He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love. And so I insist--and God backs me up on this--that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself."*



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**Truth # 2:** Ephesians 4:25 *"Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak truth with his neighbor,"*

One of the things that we humans do that stands between us and the intimacy with our spouse that we desire involves the screwy way we apologize. When we offend our spouse we are typically more impacted by the way their reaction to the offense affects us than we are by what we did that provoked it. Essentially it's still all about us. We'll apologize by asking for forgiveness for the offense only – failing to recognize how what we did impacted them personally. We're not really dealing with the truth of the situation because if what we did caused no offense, we'd do it again.

For instance, a couple we have dealt with had a disagreement early on in their marriage which impacted them for 20+ years. The husband did something admittedly stupid with no thought as to how it would affect her. When the fallout of the event finally did reach her, he simply admitted his mistake.

The difficulty was there was that there was never any acknowledgment on his part regarding how what he done had hurt her. His viewpoint was limited to what he did and how he wished he hadn't done it – it was all about him. There was never any thought on his part that what he had done had; broken trust with her, devalued her, caused her to lose respect for him, detrimentally impacted their meager finances and caused her to question if he was going to be a good provider; and gave her cause to wonder when it would happen again.

When we offend someone, and specifically our spouse, we must own the offensive behavior AND how it impacted them emotionally and spiritually. Failure to do so says, "It's really all about me and you don't really count. I'm only saying I'm sorry because I don't like having to deal with how the results of it are affecting me." If we're not willing to move on to that level of intimacy, then we are simply asking our spouse to store up resentment toward us for our selfishness. If we're not willing to move on to that level of honesty, then we are also simply asking our spouse for a divorce. Because two people can't be in love with the same person and both be happy.

**Truth #3:** Ephesians 4:26a *"Be angry but do not sin."*

The Greek word "**orgizō**", translated as angry means; to provoke or enrage, that is, (passively) become exasperated: - be angry (wroth).

If the Word says, "be angry", then there must be a place where it is Okay to be angry. It is the church that has attempted to steal this emotion from us, or make us ashamed to have it. The theory being if our natural reaction to anger automatically results in sin, then we must not get angry, for it is the root of sin. It sure looks like the way to handle it, but it is not a full expression of the truth.

Jesus said in John 16:33b, *"In the world ye shall have tribulation: but fear not; I have overcome the world."* You don't have to live in this world very long before experiencing tribulation for yourself. I don't know about you, but tribulation pretty much makes me angry every time. I simply don't like it. It always interrupts my plans for continual tranquility, not to mention the fact that it flies directly in the face of my constitutionally guaranteed right of the pursuit of personal happiness. I've been known to get angry when my expectations were not realized; when I was robbed; when someone ran into my car; when I was defrauded by an insurance



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company; or any number of other things that happen regularly on the highways and byways of life.

Webster's 1856 Dictionary defines tribulation this way; **"Severe affliction; distresses of life; vexations. In Scripture, it often denotes the troubles and distresses which proceed from persecution."** My mate has a right to certain things in our marriage as a result of the covenant under God that we have together, as ratified by our marriage vows. When I do not provide them for her, it may not actually be persecution, but it sure feels like it to her. She has a perfect right to get angry with me. At the very least, exasperated! She does not however, have a right to sin, but she does have a God given right to expect certain things of me. My mate has a right to intimate communication with me. My mate has a right to expect me to create a safe environment for her to express her self. My mate has a right to expect me to expect me to change if what I'm doing is harming her. My mate has a right to give input into decisions I make in her behalf. And my mate has a right to know what's on my mind – even if I'd really like to keep it to myself.

But with every right in marriage also comes a responsibility; to draw upon the provisions of the covenant to provide what is needed to make the relationship work as God intended. Intimate communication is not a want, it's a need we all have, and when its not met we feel it. When a felt need is not met it will always produce some form of anger or resentment.

If anger is not expressed in some form, it will be internalized. Expressing your anger or your displeasure with something is not necessarily sin. However, failing to express it will eventually damage your health. We often compound our problems by failing to express our anger to our spouse, but expressing it freely to others. After all, we need to tell somebody, "so they can pray for me." Talking to someone about the marital situations that anger us may help give us another perspective, perhaps one that is even Godly, but in reality it will not produce relief because we're not telling the one who can actually do something about it.

The church in an effort to keep us from sinning as a result of our anger has resorted to distorting the entire issue by throwing out verse 4:29 *"Let not any evil talk come out of your mouths."* We usually even clarify it further by saying, *"let no negative word come out of your mouth."* Some have even gone so far as to call it slander. Ergo; you can't get angry and express anything because it will naturally be negative and therefore sinful. That sounds good, but anything that relies on the flesh to keep us from sin is destined to failure.

The Jews of the OT did the same thing. They realized that every time they broke the 10 Commandments, God would get mad (angry) at them and cause them to be carried off into captivity. So they figured that if they could build a fence around the 10 Commandments it would keep them from being dragged off to some foreign land. So they created the Michnah, a series of 417 rules to keep – it was also called the "The Tradition of the Elders". It was this very thing that angered Jesus so much because the 10 Commandments are really all about relationship with God and how to conduct your relationships with others. (Matt 15:1-15) The problem was that if the flesh wasn't capable of keeping the original 10 Commandments, is surely wasn't going to be much more successful in keeping another 400+. Jesus himself pretty well nailed it when he said in John 6:63 *"It is the spirit that quickens (vitalizes); the flesh profits (is useful for) nothing:"*



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Anger is something we all have to deal with. Ladies and gentlemen, you were according to Genesis 2, created in the image of God. If you believe God doesn't get angry then you haven't read the Bible at all. What would make us think that anger is not supposed to be one of the natural expressions of life, and particularly toward circumstances that are unjust, unlawful, hurtful and destructive? Just because we have never dared to learn how to express anger in times of great emotional turmoil doesn't mean we're not supposed to learn. There is a way to express anger and not enter into sin!

Unfortunately we're all too familiar with those who have never tried to put a lid on it and end up throwing up on anyone within earshot; the ones who have no self-control what-ever and vociferously express everything that happens to pop into their mind. It seems that the only ones who are comfortable expressing anger in public are those who have no boundaries on its expression and don't care who it hurts – it's all about them. The difficulty for most people is that we've never seen anyone successfully express anger without getting into sin. Why? Most people just stuff it because they fear what will come out next if they say anything at all.

Make no mistake in what I am saying here, we were created to express anger, but within certain bounds, at the right time, and to the right people. To do otherwise is simply indulging the flesh and is decidedly unhealthy – not to mention sinful. But just because you were created to feel anger doesn't give you a right to bash people with it.

Choose your words carefully because you can't take them back. Make sure they're seasoned with grace because you may have to eat them later.

**Truth #4:** Ephesians 4:26a *"Be angry but do not sin."*

You do not have right to say anything that comes to your mind as our society has declared. You have a greater judge. Matthew 12:36, *"But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."*

One of the principal reasons why some people seem to have diarrhea of the mouth when describing how they feel about their spouse is a combination of frustration and a veiled attempt at manipulation. Frustration that their spouse hasn't positively responded to their attempts to get them to do what they want, coupled with continuous attempts to manipulate them by accusation and anger. When over time, nothing seems get their attention and causes them to do what they desire, not even their prayers, perhaps public humiliation will do the trick. I have known several people who fell into this trap. Half are now on their third or fourth marriage. The other half are spiritually and emotionally dead; as miserable as they can be, but still married!

Most of them got here because they didn't take time to learn how to communicate when the problems were manageable. Where are you?

If you are tired of your spouse not listening to you, then you may have to choose a different communication style in order to get your message across. When our oldest son was about four, he grew exasperated with his mother's failure to pay attention to him when he was talking. Forcefully jerking on her pant leg he said, "Momma, wook at me! When I talking, wook at me!" That was simply a take off on what she had done with him when his attention was elsewhere. If I have your eye – I also have your ears. Sometimes that's what's necessary to foster adult to adult communication.





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**Truth #5:** Ephesians 4:26b *"do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the Devil."*

Deal with it! If it takes some time for you to cool off and gather your thoughts, you haven't lost the argument or lost your ability to set the situation straight. Better that you speak the truth in love than drive a wedge in your relationship with harsh thoughtless words bent on justification rather than reconciliation. Don't let too much time elapse before you bring it up again, for the sake of your marriage.

Our typical behavior is to let things pile up and when we can't stand it any more we'll blow the whole mess out like Mount Vesuvius; covering the entire scene with molten lava and searing ash, trashing everything. It comes out as one generalized accusation which no one can either counter, nor resolve, because the individual issues cannot be separated for discussion.

Hebrews 13:4, *"Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled:"* Some have used this verse to declare that whatever happens sexually behind closed doors between two consenting adults (man and wife) is undefiled. And that is true. It's just not the whole story. If you cannot deal with the issues of life between the two of you until you get in bed together at the end of the day, go ahead and deal with the situation. God will extend his grace over your marriage bed if the two of you will deal with the problem between you. Failure to do so earlier in the day, if you had opportunity, will always lead to bedroom dysfunction. Dealing with the issue means bringing resolution to it, even if it's temporarily deciding to set a time the next day to deal with it when the two of you aren't tired and more time can be devoted to it.

Most of us chose to inflict our anger on our spouse in the bedroom by giving them the silent treatment. Surely they'll get the message that I'm angry if I just huff and puff around here, finally giving them the cold shoulder as roll over with my back to them.

How many have asked, "What's wrong?" only to hear, "Well if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you!"

Ladies have you ever heard of "woman's intuition?" Well, there is no corresponding corollary for men. We just don't seem to be able to get it. We're not that sensitive. You just have to say what you think to us very plainly. Don't expect us to understand the fullness of what you want to express to us through body language, grunts, groans, sighs, shoulder shrugs and raised eyebrows. You're just going to have to hit us in the face with a wet squirrel and speak your mind. We can take it. To presume that your husband can't take it is to believe that God can't or won't work in him to bring the two of you to unity. How dare you!

**Truth #6:** Ephesians 4:26b *"do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the Devil."*

Deal with it or suffer the consequences. The enemy of your soul is always around; (1Peter 5:7-9) *"Casting all your care upon him; for he cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."*



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The truth of this is more real than you know. The evil one is present at every moment trying to sell you a series of lies. They always come in threes:

- a. Lies about you. (ie., You are not loved. You're no longer important to your spouse. You're not desirable, otherwise they'd pay attention to you.);
- b. Lies about God. (ie., If God loved you, He'd fix this. God doesn't really like you or he'd get involved. God isn't really powerful enough, so he can't do anything for you.);
- c. Lies about others. (ie, Your spouse doesn't love you anymore. Your spouse is secretly interested in someone else, or he/she would be more affectionate.)

Failing to come to grips with the issue between you and your spouse, no matter how small, plays right into the enemy's hand. Resentment and bitterness with your spouse will settle in before long. Then your own expectations about how they will act or react in certain situations become the rule rather than the exception. Next, is failure to follow Hebrews 12:14-15, *"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;"*

Do you see what happens? Our own resentment "troubles us". We are troubled because by their own choice, we choose not to follow a prescription of peace. There is in this verse a promise of the grace of God for those who will attempt to deal with issues between people – a specifically our spouse. Because dealing with our issues promptly is pursuing peace and thereby robbing the Devil of any opportunity in our marriage. Need for the Lord to show up in your marriage? Follow peace!

**Truth #7:** 4:28 *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may give to those in need.*

I think what the Lord is saying here is that if you know you're doing something wrong, quit it. There are all manner of communication handicaps and shortfalls that we have, and we're aware of many of them, but do nothing to eliminate them and create more healthy habits is stupid. To do so is somewhat like a thief going about his business fully aware that jail time is in his future if he gets caught. Sooner or later poor communication is going to catch up with you to. It's just a matter of time. The same is true of failing to communicate effectively. Sooner or later the results of poor communication are going to catch up with you and seriously damage your marital relationship.

Like the thief who has never worked for a living, doing something radically different seems to involve great risk. What if it doesn't work? Then what will happen to me? The definition of insanity is to continue to do the same thing expecting different results.

**Truth #8:** 4:29-30 *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."*

This is a very interesting piece of scripture because it seems to say almost the opposite of what we've been taught. We've been taught – perhaps by the enemy – that to talk about difficult or significantly negative issues is so fraught with potential disaster that we'll just pray and let the Lord work it out. But this scripture says the opposite. My paraphrased version goes like this ... "Don't always be negative about everything, having to deal with everything right



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this minute. You can if you need to, but everything is not an emergency. If you do have to talk about it, make sure it's at the right moment so that what you say will be heard. So there will be grace upon it."

This scripture states fairly clearly that there are times when it's appropriate to deal with hard issues. You can't talk about them all the time, or anytime you want to, but you can when your partner can be edified (can hear you), and only then when the time is right. There is a right time and a wrong time to dump your complaints before your spouse. When he/she is not in a mood to hear you is not one of them. The issue may well be bothering the snot out of you, but if you deliver it at the wrong time, they'll probably have an issue of their own you'll have to address.

**Truth #9:** 4:30 *"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."*

According to John 17, the Holy Spirit has been sent as an agency of unity among us, and especially with our spouses. It grieves the Holy Spirit when we are not honest with one another; when we will not deal with the issues between us because of fear; when we will not forgive immediately and seek reconciliation; when we distance ourselves from one another because of an offense, real or imagined.

John 14:16-17 *"And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it sees him not, neither knows him: but you know him; for he dwells with you, and shall be in you."*

When you accepted Jesus the Christ as your Savior and Lord, you got the Holy Spirit. The fine print of the contract may never have been explained to you, but you got him anyway. According to this scripture we got the Comforter, who is also called the Spirit of Truth. The funny thing is that if when you get hurt and don't go to the Holy Spirit for comfort, you don't get the Spirit of Truth either. Then there is nothing to help you fend off the lies of the enemy.

John 16:33b *"In the world you shall have tribulation: but have no fear; I have overcome the world."* When tribulation (marital discord) comes; and it will; if I don't go to the Comforter (John 14) I'll go directly to fear. If I go to fear, I'll never get to the Comforter. If I don't go the Comforter, I don't get the Spirit of Truth either. Then I'm not only stuck with all my pain, I'm stuck with the lies the enemy sows as well.

**Unforgiveness and all the other stuff mentioned in verse 4:31 will cut you off from the Comforter.**

**Truth #10:** 4:31 *"Let all bitterness, and anger, and wrath (passion, fierceness, indignation), and clamor (outcry), and slander be put away from you, along with all malice,"*

Let me repeat this same verse with the fullness of the meaning behind each word expressed; "Let all bitterness, and anger (desire (as a reaching forth or excitement of the mind), that is, (by analogy) violent passion (ire, or abhorrence); by implication punishment: - anger, indignation, vengeance), and wrath (passion, fierceness, indignation), and clamor (outcry), and slander (vilification - blasphemy, evil speaking, railing) be put away from you, along with all malice (badness, that is, (subjectively) depravity, or (actively) malignity, or (passively) trouble: - evil, maliciousness, naughtiness, wickedness),"



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Unresolved anger caused by not being able, or not choosing to, express hurt and bring resolution to the source of it will inevitably bring bitterness of heart and all sorts of other ungodliness out of you toward your mate. Anything left unto itself will not get better, but worse. That's the way this fallen world works. Everything devolves to its lowest common denominator. Look at the above verse in its amplified form. There is seemingly no end to the evil anger initiates if left unresolved. The only thing not mentioned here is physical murder, although if these words actually describe our potential feelings, we will have already murdered our love for them.

If we refuse to deal with it there is no way we can escape from malice and in time we will begin to slander of our mate before others.

**Truth #11:** 4:32 *"And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God forgave you in Christ."*

It is necessary that each home have order, be it for a couple or an entire house full. The order to be established is revealed to us in verses 4:32 through 5:1

If this is the Holy Spirit's instruction in how to treat each other, how is that we believe we can exempt our spouse from this scripture just because they treated us in a way that hurt us? These are not suggestions. These are mandates for a happy marriage and a full, healthy, loving relationship over time.

Parents who raise their children under a system where there is no order in the home soon come to find that their children grow rebellious and anti-social. For some reason, the parents never seem to get the fact that there is security for children, as well as for the spouse, in an environment where communication is open, honest and honoring; where there is order. Bringing resolution to problems in a manner that meets the needs and honors all participants, establishes and maintains order that makes the home a sanctuary, a refuge from the world.

**Truth #12:** 5:1-2 *"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, even as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God."*

I speak this to men; it is your place to provide/create an atmosphere in your home where your wife has the security and confidence to know that you will not only hear what she has to say, but that when she airs her grievance that you will do everything in your power to resolve it – that you will do something about it.

We met with a couple who had been married for 25 years who's only learned communication skill was to tell each other what hurt them and how it made them feel. They would go through this routine where one would say, "You hurt me when you did such-and-such, and it made me feel like I wasn't important to you ... that I had no place in your life." The spouse would reply, "Well, I'm sorry. You hurt my feelings when you blah-blah-blah." And that was the end of it. They had both aired how what happened had made them feel, and the whole thing was over. I'm sure there was some therapeutic value in it somewhere, but the real issue was never touched. Nothing ever got resolved. The sources of the hurt and wounding were never really addressed and there was no commitment from either party to change their behavior. They had jumped through the same flaming hoop for 25 years, to no avail.



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The result was that 25 years had gone by, the kids were all leaving home and neither of them was convinced deep down where it counted that the other really loved them. Why? Because they never battled for each other – only with each other.

## So How Should It Work?

### **1. The Preparation Phase**

As stated in Truth #1, each spouse must be able to tell the other what their needs are. Notice I said needs, not wants. Most men would like sex every day. That's not a need, that's a fantasy! There is some level of sexual activity that will foster a healthy relationship. It's not everyday and it's not once a Quarter. It is different for each couple.

In order to tell your spouse what your needs are, and do it effectively, it is necessary for you to understand what your own needs are and how to communicate them. Spend some time reflecting on why "this" is important to you. Is this the real need, or is the root of it actually something else? Will I be happy if this need is met? Does this need have to be met a certain way? What will change if this "need" is met. What will happen if this need is only met half the time, or, What will happen in our relationship if it is never met? Can I live happily with without it?

If in reviewing your un-met need(s) you find that you're still angry about something, forgive it and release it. You cannot enter into such a session carrying baggage.

Embrace the fact that disagreements, differences of opinion and arguments are actually good for your marriage. The Word says, "It is through much tribulation that we enter the Kingdom of God." The same is true of marriage. The process of working through problems brings us into a unity that nothing else can provide. It is in the depths of that process that love and commitment are proven to each of you. So the next time an argument ensues, embrace it. God Does his best work in the middle of things like that.

### **2. The Presentation Phase**

There is a right time to present your needs. 15 minutes before the Super Bowl game starts is probably not good. Right before you turn out the light at night, after your spouse has had an especially long, stressful day is definitely not good. 11:30 PM on April 14th, while your mate is completing your Federal taxes, probably isn't real good either. Choose the time wisely for the best response. You need time to present your needs in detail, and time for discussion as well.

If you need to make a list, so you don't forget an important point, go ahead and do it. Just don't read from it. This has to be as heart to heart as you can make it. Remember, you are presenting your needs. It is not a demand! You are simply telling your spouse what you believe your need is, how you believe it could be met, and how it makes you feel when it is not met. This is not a gripe session! You can't drag up a laundry list of stuff from three years ago you're still peeved about.

Once your personal need has been communicated, you need to be sure you've been heard. A simple and effective exercise is to ask your spouse to tell you what they just heard. If that's not what you meant, repeat what you said but use different words. Draw a word picture if it can aid in getting the message across. Sometimes it may be helpful to add, "Now this is what I didn't say ...", giving them specific examples.



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A few years ago my wife and I taught a class based upon the classic, "The Five Love Languages" by Gary Chapman, 1992, Northfield Publishing, Chicago. We'd both read it some years before and presumed we had understood and were practicing what we and Gary Chapman preached. I knew my wife's love language (that which spoke love from me to her) was acts of service, like washing dishes for her, etc. Mine is gifts. The problem was that although each of us knew what the other's love language was, we still insisted on speaking our own 50% of the time. In time confusion ensued. Why? Because when someone isn't speaking your language, at some point you're going to wonder, what the heck is that they're saying?

So it was with us. Works of service don't speak anything to me. If I ran out of clean underwear, I'd throw some in the wash. I guess she thought it was great that I was helping her do the wash. I simply thought, I needed some clean underwear; nothing more. Get the picture? For years I wondered why I never got anything for Christmas that cost more than \$10, even though I always got her something relatively expensive. For close to 20 years I wrote it off to our love of lavishing gifts on our kids. Giving gifts meant nothing to her.

Folks, you can't live your married life being half-right! It's too important for that. Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and life abundant." He didn't say half-life, or half-abundant life, (whatever that is) or almost abundant or nearly satisfying. If your needs are important to you, then you need to make certain that they are known, and that you convey that it is important to you that they be met.

It is in hearing and being heard that all the lies of the enemy are banished.

### **3. The Negotiation Phase**

Understand, that your spouse has a right not to meet your need. They do have a choice in the matter. And they have a right to question whether this is a need or simply a want. You have to know which is which, and to be able to say why it is a need and why it is important to you.

This is the hardest part, because we tend to get defensive. Our initial thought is that they are questioning my judgment, or worse, they're just saying that because they don't want to meet my needs. Neither has been established. Don't open the door to the enemy before you've heard your spouse out. They have a right to test it. Do your best to keep emotion at a minimum; for it's in these instances when we can derail the entire process by jumping to conclusions about what you'll have to live with the rest of your life. Just because it doesn't look like it's going to turn out like you want, doesn't mean its over. Stay with it! Besides, you can revisit the issue in a few months if it's not satisfactory.

What if your spouse legitimately has no ability to satisfy that need? Is there some interim/intermediate/compromise position that's acceptable to both of you for a few months until you can figure something else out? If your spouse does have the ability, but it puts a strain on them, you do not have the right to demand it be met at any cost. If your spouse makes such a demand and you give in to it, in time it will breed resentment.

As the spouse to whom the need is being expressed, you have to listen with an open heart and an open mind. You cannot dismiss an expressed felt need out of hand, or immediately



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consider it an imposition, or an impossibility. You may however, need to ask questions to quantify and qualify it before you make a decision. Example of such may be:

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is this to you?
- If I were to attempt to meet your need in this \_\_\_\_\_ manner, would that be Okay, or does it have to be this way?
- If I did \_\_\_\_\_ instead of \_\_\_\_\_, would that suffice as meeting the need?
- If I can't promise to meet your need right now, but would seriously consider doing so in \_\_\_\_ months, would that be Okay?
- Can I have a day or two to think about it?
- When have I met this need, or almost met this need?
- Give me an example of how I might meet this need.
- What is the minimum I could do that you would consider this need as being met?

## What Happens When One Spouse Refuses to Negotiate?

What if your spouse has the ability to meet the need, but doesn't have the desire? Start praying. Remember, you are one flesh and the Holy Spirit, according to John 17:21, has a reason to make you one. It's the prayer of Jesus, and He usually gets His prayers answered. Be prepared for the Holy Spirit to start dealing with the issues of your heart in the process because there is usually a reason behind our demands that's hidden from us.

If your spouse is making an outright demand that you meet some specific need of his or hers, and not meeting it seems to be a real deal breaker, don't hesitate to take it to a third party for advice and/or arbitration. Find some wizened older couple whom you can trust and lay your mutual problem out before them. Each of you still has to make a decision about it, but there is safety in counsel, both for you and your marriage. The exercise will give you some tools for use in future situations.

## 4. Periodic Re-evaluation Phase

Our needs change over time. That which we thought was so important in our 20's is not much of a big deal in our 40's. But other issues increase in importance. Still others have yet to be discovered. We've never static. There will always be opportunity for us to go back to step one again and state our needs to our spouse. If you make it a practice of life, the process will become very natural and resolution will be easier to reach. Your life together will indeed become abundant.

Finally ....

Love demands a sacrifice! If you will never sacrifice, that is, lay down your life for your spouse, or prefer them over yourself, how can they be convinced that you really do love them? They can't! It's impossible! Only the depths to which one spouse will go to resolve, or with finality put an end to a conflict, can actually prove love. Self-sacrifice and problem resolution are not two mutually exclusive concepts. You can't have one without some form of the other. And it has to be done consistently over time – it's never a one-shot deal.



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Ecclesiastes 9:9 (MSG) - *"Relish life with the spouse you love each and every day of your precarious life. Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange for the hard work of staying alive. Make the most of each one!"*

And finally ... finally

What is the price of good communication? First of all it will cost you everything because you have to lay your life down for one another to achieve it. You may even have to die to yourself. But it also has a financial price tag. We have people who come to us for counseling whose marriage is in dire straights and tell us they cannot afford to pay us for the help. That's not a problem for us, as it is the Lord who supplies. But what is mystifying is that as we get to know them, we find they have a second home, a boat, snow skis and vacation at the beach religiously for two or more weeks a year, every year in some pretty expensive places. And yet they can't afford help.

It's funny what we can convince ourselves that we have to have. And yet when it comes to the most important relationship we have, we can't justify spending money acquiring the tools that will help us live as Jesus wishes. Jesus himself said in John 10:10b "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Notice he didn't say that we will automatically have life, or more of it. It comes at a price. If you will not invest your money, you probably won't invest your time either. In this instance, you get out of it what you put into it! In the terms of an 80's commercial, it's "pay me now or, pay me later!"