

Taking the High Road during Marital Difficulties



By Leslie Vernick

Jennifer came alone to her first counseling session eager for help. Her marriage was stagnant and she'd tried everything she knew to bring it back to life. Hoping for some fresh answers, she perched herself on the edge of my couch and said, "I've tried everything I know. It's not that my husband, Tim, is an evil person, I just find him boring and selfish. All he does is sit around watching football on television and I feel like I'm there just to meet his needs. Does God really want me to live the rest of my life like this? What about me and what I need?"

As Christian counselors, we all encounter situations where one person in the marriage is more willing to work on improving their relationship than the other person. We usually approach these cases by encouraging the willing spouse to persevere. Perhaps we assign a Christian book or Scripture passage about marriage, hoping that practical changes in one person will bring about positive changes in the marriage.

Sometimes that works, but often it doesn't. For example, Eric came to his counseling session already deeply discouraged. "Julie, my wife just doesn't want anything to do with me." As he poured out his pain he cried, "For two years I've

read books on how to be a good husband, a godly man, and an effective father. I've gone to Promise Keepers, Bible studies, and to my pastor for help. But it isn't working and I'm so tired. I feel like giving up. What am I supposed to do? Nothing is happening."

When people like Jennifer and Eric seek counseling they have one quest in mind: "I hope you can make me feel better—or help me change this situation—and fast!" They come to us, "the experts," wanting to learn something, *anything*, to make their spouses respond positively to them, or to help their marriages change to become more of what God says it should be.

At one level, Jennifer's and Eric's desires are good and legitimate. All of us who are married want the joys of marriage. Sometimes the work that one person does in a marriage positively influences the spouse to grow. But just as often it does not. And when nothing in the marriage partner changes, our counselees feel angry, discouraged, and disillusioned. Struggling, they are tempted to give up on their marriage, and even on their faith, concluding that God and his Word are not powerful enough to help.

How do we counsel individuals like Jennifer and Eric in their disappointing marriages? What can we offer them that gives *true* hope? What can we offer them if we can't give them the hope of an improved

* Leslie Vernick is a counselor in private practice in Allentown, PA. and author of the book *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2003).

marriage?

Cast a Vision for Something Greater Than Marital Happiness

Both Jennifer and Eric need to change their focus. They need to give up dreams of improved marriages and changed spouses as their goal. This may seem counterproductive, but as long as they strive only for happy marriages, or changed spouses, they will feel defeated when that doesn't happen. Rather, we need to give them a vision for something far greater than temporal happiness or marital bliss. They need to see themselves and their marriages through the lens of God's actual purposes. Nothing may change in their marriages or spouses, but something indeed can and does change the heart of a person who strives to know God more fully.

Often it is in the midst of marital pain and confusion that God gets our attention. He begins to draw our hearts toward a greater knowledge and deeper experience of Him and

God's picture for marriage is far broader than a venue to meet our individual desires for blessings. God uses the marital relationship as a metaphor for Christ and his bride, the church. Christ gives himself to meet what we truly need, not just what we *think* we need or want. One of God's purposes for the marital relationship is not only our happiness, but to teach us holiness.¹

Spiritual and emotional growth takes place in the context of relationships. We are born into a family where we learn, or don't learn, the fundamental lessons on how to give and receive love; how to communicate our feelings, desires, and needs; how to care for others; how to handle conflict; and how to get along with people who are different from ourselves. As we mature, we experience new relationships that continue to instruct us. God uses people and difficult relationships to train us in very practical ways about how to love when we don't feel like it, how to forgive when we've been sinned against, how to speak the truth in love, and how to overcome evil with good. Marriage provides a

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His ways. He tells us that during our most difficult troubles, we can find joy because the troubles in our lives, including marital difficulties, can be used for our good. (See James 1:3; Rom. 8:28f).

For most people, such words of truth stay as information, not transformation. Part of our job as Christian counselors, is to help counselees move what they know in their heads to their hearts. We must give Jennifer and Eric hope that God is good and up to something good in the midst of their painful marriages.

God's Purpose for Marriage

Most people get married because they believe that they have found the "right person" to share their life with. We choose someone whom we think will care for us and provide companionship, love, and sexual intimacy. Although these are important ingredients in any happy marriage, is this God's ultimate purpose for marriage?

perfect backdrop for continued lessons in everyday practical theology. To make this essential shift in our counseling, we must give our counselees a vision of how God uses marriage to help them to become more like Christ (See Heb. 12:14).

By nature, all of us are more concerned with getting rather than giving, with being served than serving. Self-sacrifice, suffering, and servanthood are not subjects taught in most pre-marital counseling classes. However, within the context of marriage, God teaches us, in a very practical sense, what it means to love others and to die to ourselves. These lessons are not learned from a book or in the context of marital bliss but in hardship. In addition, God often uses marital difficulties to draw us into the sufferings of Christ.

- Jesus was rejected.
- Jesus was up against hard hearted and

¹ See Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, for thorough teaching.

stubborn people.

- Jesus loved and served, gave and sacrificed, often getting nothing in return.

Jennifer and Eric, each in their own marriages, experienced some of the same.

God works to build the character of Jesus in Jennifer and Eric through their difficult and unresponsive spouses. We will never be like Christ as long as our own desires for good things (to have a good marriage, to have a spouse who is interesting and inviting, and who loves us in return) predominate in our minds and hearts. But, Jennifer protested, "Doesn't God say He will fulfill the desires of my heart?" (Psalm 37:4).

To understand this dilemma we must again look at the heart of Christ. His greatest desire was to please His Heavenly Father. This gave Him great joy, even in the face of deep anguish and hardship (Hebrews 12:2). If we are to grow to become more like Christ, we must long for something more than achieving temporal happiness—just getting the things we *think* we

not fair. I just want to be happy."

These statements reveal more than Jennifer's unhappiness or dissatisfaction with her husband. They expose a fundamental flaw in her relationship with God. It is easy for people to believe *in* God, but when He tells us that only He fulfills us and makes us happy, we're not quite sure we believe Him. We long for something else (a happy marriage, a loving wife, a spiritual husband) to fill our aching heart. Many of us are in a relationship with God for what He gives us, not for who He is. When He fails to give us what we think we need for our happiness, then we have little use for Him.

In our counseling, we have an opportunity to draw our client's heart toward the heart of God. No one is more concerned with our well-being than Jesus. He says that He has come to give us abundant life (John 10:10). Eternal life with Him isn't merely a ticket to heaven; it is a relationship with the Almighty God (John 17:3). He tells us that true happiness is found when we pursue Him and His righteousness

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need.

As a Christian counselor, I must help Jennifer shift her predominant desire from having a good marriage, or receiving the love of her spouse, to desiring to love and obey God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. My purpose goes deeper than helping her learn how to respond with biblical correctness in the face of deep pain. I must help her long for something greater than just doing the right thing. I must teach her to how to find joy and happiness in loving and obeying God, all the while, longing for a loving companion.

Obstacles to Making the Shift

You will often encounter resistance when you try to facilitate this change of core goals. "What can I do to make my marriage better?" and "How can I change my spouse?" We can anticipate this resistance and work through it. For example, when I propose this new way of thinking about her marriage, Jennifer says, "But why do I have to change when he won't?" It's

(Matthew 5:6; Matthew 6:33), not when we hunger after a great marriage (or anything else for that matter). This does not mean that our marital relationship is *unimportant* to God. It means it is just not our most important relationship. Desiring God (and not only what He gives us) is the first shift in perspective that a person needs to make in order to see what God is actually up to in marital difficulties.

A critical error we sometimes make as biblical counselors is to pay more attention to God's principles than God Himself. Jesus never commanded His followers to obey Him without a loving relationship with Him. He tells us repeatedly that "If we love Him, we will obey Him" (John 14). Many times we get this process backwards. We try to encourage believers to obey Him without checking out who (or what) is their first love.

It is not wrong or selfish to want to be happy. But we are misguided and/or deceived if we believe that any real or lasting happiness can

be found apart from knowing, loving, and obeying God (See Jer. 2:11-13; 1 Pet. 1:8; and for the opposite, Ps. 68:6; Prov. 13:15). The difficulties in marriage are meant to draw us to God so that we might not only experience His love and comfort during our suffering, but that we might trust His goodness and His sovereignty. We want to teach our counselees to desire God because they know He loves them and has their best interests in His mind when He instructs them in His ways.

Help Jennifer Work on Herself, not Her Husband or the Marriage

After you have facilitated the change from merely desiring marital improvement to a longing for God, you can now help Jennifer see her life from God's perspective and what He is up to in the midst of marital pain. I see four

this way." For example, when my husband, Howard, procrastinates and doesn't do something that I've asked him to do, I feel impatient and irritated. Then I get critical. Howard's behavior is not *making* me feel these feelings or making me react this way. He is merely the catalyst that exposes the impatience and critical spirit that is already in my heart. My reaction to the situation reveals something about who I am, who I am becoming, and who I am in Christ.

Jesus explains it this way. "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45-46). It is crucial that our counselees look at what comes out of their own mouths when their spouse disappoints them, sins against

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main purposes.

1. God Uses Marital Difficulties to Expose the Motives of Jennifer's Heart

Rather than continue to focus in counseling on what Jennifer's husband is doing that is upsetting, hurtful, or wrong *to* her, we must begin to redirect her attention and help her see what happens *in her own heart* in the midst of marital distress.²

Someone has once said, "Adversity introduces a person to himself." It is often during the times when Jennifer's spouse is not doing what she would like him to do that God wants to show her a few things about herself. When Jennifer's spouse does something she does not like, she reacts. She may blow up, criticize, sulk or withdraw, and even shut down. Often she blames her spouse for her own reactions. She says things like, "You make me so mad," or "If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have acted

them, or just plain annoys them. Reactions reveal what is in her heart. In these moments of conflict, she usually only sees her husband's faults, not her own. But God sees it differently—He sees what is in her heart.

2. Stop Reacting and Start Responding

Jennifer came to counseling grinning from ear to ear. "I finally get it," she said. When I don't react to Paul's stupid remarks with a sarcastic dig, God actually works in his heart." Jennifer learned an important lesson. No one sets out to intentionally ruin her marriage or hurt her mate, but our *reactions* to our spouse's wrongs can be like tossing a lit match into gasoline. Most of us don't stop to think about how to respond in a Christ-like way when our spouse does something that upsets us. We just react.

As Jennifer grows in her desire to love God and to become more like Him, she can learn to stop reacting out of her fleshly nature and bad habits and start responding as God wants her to. This often starts with learning to harness her tongue. Proverbs tells us that "reckless words pierce like a sword" (Prov. 12:18). We all

² Please be sure that you have established sufficient rapport with your counselee and expressed empathy and concern for the pain that she suffers when her husband does upsetting, painful, or sinful things.

wrestle at times with controlling our tongue. When we feel something strongly it can be downright painful not to blurt it right out. The psalmist struggled with this: "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence" (Ps. 39:1). Yet, in the very same psalm (verses 2 and 3) we read, "But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased." There is something within us that feels good when we let someone have it with our words.

In our psychologized, "feel-good" culture, our counselees have usually been encouraged to express their negative feelings—often blurting them out so that they do not become "unhealthy." But negative feelings are a lot like vomit. It always feels better getting it out, but vomit belongs in the toilet and not on our spouse.

One way to help Jennifer get these destructive emotions out is to ask her to write a letter to her husband—but not to send the finished product. Writing her thoughts and

marriage. One impulse was to publicly shame her husband by exposing their marital problems to his family, and to the church. Before recklessly reacting, it is imperative that we help our counselee understand who her real enemy is. As much as she might feel like it in the moment, her spouse is not the enemy. For all of us, our real enemy is Satan—he is out to destroy us (1 Pet. 5:8). His strategy is deception. He tries to convince us of lies. "God and His ways don't really satisfy. If you believe and follow God, you will be gypped out of something good." He mutters, "Why should you work on your marriage? After all, look what he's (she's) done. His (her) sins are too big. Don't forgive. You have needs too. You deserve to be happy. God doesn't want you to stay in an unhappy marriage."

I often tell my counselees, "Satan may have already influenced and deceived your spouse. But do not let him deceive you. When you respond to evil done against you with more evil, Satan wins."

When engaging in marital combat, we need to fight for higher purposes: the glory of God, the preservation of our marriages, our spiritual health and well-being, and our children's future.

feelings down exposes her reactions so that she can deal with them before the Lord. This prevents her from adding more damage to the marital relationship by carelessly blurting out destructive emotions without prior thought and prayer. Ephesians 4:15 and 4:29 *always* apply! In writing these things down, Jennifer can clarify her feelings and thoughts in preparation for another time when she is in a better frame of mind, when she can articulate her concerns more appropriately in a discussion with her husband.

Teach Jennifer to go to God and ask Him for His perspective on her marriage. He will then teach her how to speak the truth in love so that she can address what her spouse has done to upset her in a constructive, rather than destructive manner.

3. Clarify The Battle and Where To Find Appropriate Fighting Weapons

Jennifer felt deep hurt and anger in her

In order to win the battle Jennifer faces, she will not only need to have a clear understanding of Satan's strategies, she will also need to understand what she is fighting for. Most of the time when I am arguing with my husband, I lose sight of this important truth. I often argue to get my way, to be right, or to prove my point. But the real struggle couples face is not for such temporal victories. When engaging in marital combat, we need to fight for higher purposes: the glory of God, the preservation of our marriages, our spiritual health and well-being, and our children's future.

With this in mind, the only weapons that have any real power to demolish strongholds are spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:4). Rather than recklessly reacting to her husband's sin, teach Jennifer how to fight to win—by overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Peter reminds us, "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Pet.

2:15).

We overcome evil with good when we respond to wrongdoing in ways that are godly, righteous and loving. In other words, teach Jennifer how to respond to her husband's wrongs in ways that are in his long-term best interests. When she learns to respond appropriately, instead of just reacting, she is not overcome by sin. That is definitely good for her, even if her husband is unresponsive.

4. Teach Your Counselee What Biblical Love Looks Like

"I just don't have that loving feeling anymore." "I can't imagine living the rest of my life with someone I don't love." Sadly, many of us, even as Christians, have learned about love from Hollywood and Harlequin romance novels rather than from the Word of the God who is love.

Many couples commit to staying married "no matter what," but do so with hard hearts and cold walls of indifference. God's command is not, "Stay married." He commands us to *love*—no matter how that person is behaving toward us: "But I tell you who hear me: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'" (Luke 6:27). Ouch! That is a whole lot harder than merely keeping my legal commitment.

From God's perspective, love is much deeper than an emotional feeling that we have for another person. It is bigger than a commitment to stay together, no matter what. To love our husband or wife as God calls us to means that we will consciously choose to act in his or her best interests, even when it costs us or involves personal sacrifice. For example, love is demonstrated when a husband stays up late talking with his wife when she needs a listening ear, even though he's dead tired and would rather sleep. Love is when a wife gladly makes a meal she knows her husband will enjoy, even if she hates to cook. But what does godly love look like when our spouse hurts us, disappoints us or sins against us? That is the biggie.

Teaching Jennifer to love her spouse when she is angry or in pain is difficult and may even feel impossible. But the kind of love that gives good gifts to undeserving people is not generated out of a human heart. It is God's love, displayed through our human efforts. When Jennifer's spouse acts wrong, she may not

be able to give him affection, warmth, or companionship very readily. However, there are some ways to biblically love a difficult spouse as we seek his or her good, regardless of the current climate of our marriage. Here are five keys to the difficult love we call "mercy."

The Gift of Acceptance. Mature love involves a full knowledge of another person, including his or her weak areas. I've heard people say over and over again in counseling, "You're not the person I married!" One husband replied to such a remark, "Oh, yes I am. But the person you dated—he was a fake."

Teaching Jennifer to accept her husband does not mean that she likes his faults. It does not imply that she should simply resign herself to a hopeless situation. True acceptance begins with understanding reality. We are all sinful creatures in process. God is not finished with us yet.

Sometimes we refuse to accept our spouses for who they are or where they are. We say things like "I can't believe you did that," or "How could you think like that?" We seem surprised when we find our spouse acts imperfectly, stupidly, or differently, as if somehow he or she isn't ever supposed to do such a thing.

The gift of acceptance involves much more than merely acknowledging our spouse's weakness or faults. In order for it to be a true gift, we must stop resenting having to give it. We learn to be emotionally content with our spouse the way he or she is right now, all the while still asking God to mature him or her.

The Gift of Truth. At times we see that Jennifer, or Eric, are not facing reality. They continue to wish for the best in spite of evidence to the contrary. They have closed their eyes to information that would enable them make better decisions. There are times, in order to love and take the high road during marital difficulties, we must help Jennifer and Eric learn to face truth, and to speak the truth in love.³

The gift of truth is one of those gifts that is not always appreciated as valuable or loving, especially when a spouse prefers to be in denial about the reality of his or her sin and its effects on others in the family. That is why it is so

³ 1 Cor. 13:1 and Eph. 4:15 speak to the importance of truth being delivered in love.

imperative that we keep in mind what genuine godly love looks like. We give the gift of truth so our spouse can see reality more clearly and as a result, hopefully make better decisions about what his or her next step is.

None of us like it when our spouse tells us something about our behavior or our attitude that we don't want to face. Yet, it is loving and good for them to tell us. Why? So that we do not continue to deceive ourselves into thinking that all is well when we are about to fall off a cliff (James 5:19).

At times, giving the gift of truth to a difficult, rebellious, or unresponsive spouse will have wonderful results. Other times our counselees may see no change and no repentance. Perhaps she will even be mocked. Encourage her that God has called her to love her husband as no one else in this world will. That may mean suffering under mockery and still speaking truth. (See Ez. 2 for a similar situation.)

The Gift of Kindness. It is clear from the Scriptures that kindness is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and that being kind is one of the very definitions of love (1 Cor. 13:4). Yet, as with the other gifts, we all struggle to give the gift of kindness when we don't feel like it or when our mate has hurt us.

Teaching Jennifer to be kind and gracious in the face of marital wrong doesn't mean we teach her to ignore wrongdoing or pretend it didn't happen. That would be like telling her to put her head back into the snake's basket after it bit her. Being kind means that whatever happens to her, she doesn't let it define her. It doesn't shape her or turn her into something evil.

We are kind toward others because we want to be like Jesus, not because our spouse necessarily deserves our kindness. We are a representative of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Therefore, our desire is to treat others with kindness and mercy because we are God's ambassadors and His image bearers. Extending kindness and mercy doesn't depend upon whether the other person has been good or bad, wrong or right. Kindness is a gift of love, not a reward for good behavior.

The Gift of Prayer. Jesus intercedes for us (John 17:20). To be more like Him, we must

also learn to intercede for others. To intercede means to speak on another's behalf or to plead his case. Moses did this in Exodus 33 when God was about to destroy the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf. Interceding for someone who has hurt us is not easy. Much like an injured animal that often attacks others, hurt people hurt other people. When we are hurt by someone it is difficult to pray for them. Teach Jennifer to ask God for His perspective and compassion toward her husband, thereby empowering her to intercede on his behalf.

Prayer is one of the toughest disciplines, especially intercessory prayer, because it is so *other-focused*. Richard Foster advises, "By means of intercessory prayer God extends to each of us a personalized, hand-engraved invitation to become intimately involved in laboring for the well-being of others."⁴ What better gift of love. We often pray *about* our enemy, but teach Jennifer that love means praying *for* her enemy.

The Gift of Consequences. The gift of consequences may not seem like a gift at all, especially toward the one receiving it. Yet, when given with the right attitude, the gift of consequences can surprise the receiver with life changing results. Often we hear, "If you've really forgiven me (or, if you really love me) you won't make me suffer the consequences."

When we implement the gift of consequences it is important we understand its purpose. It is not to be reactionary or punitive. It is to be a well thought out, prayed out course of action based on the specific wrong doing—constructed in order to communicate to someone: *This kind of behavior or action is not acceptable and I will not continue to act as if it does not matter that you do this.*

God designed the law of consequences to teach us (Gal. 6:7). Often consequences take the form of pain—to warn us to stop doing something or it will get worse.

At certain times, within some marriages, separation may be implemented as a severe consequence for certain sinful behavior. I do not say this lightly. Yet at times this is the only gift of love that convinces a spouse to consider

⁴ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 201.

his or her destructive behaviors seriously. In the book of Hosea, Hosea let Gomer experience the consequences of her adulterous ways. Her life deteriorated to the point that she was eventually sold as a slave. Hosea showed great love and forgiveness to her by bringing her back and restoring her as a wife (see Hosea 1-3).

If you are counseling a situation where the husband or wife is involved in addictive, adulterous or abusive behavior and you have limited experience in these matters, please seek expert pastoral counsel. The family's safety is paramount, and there are times when separating—especially in an abusive situation—actually raises the danger of being physically harmed.⁵

can help our clients learn to biblically love their spouses by acting in their best interests.

Conclusion

Walking Jennifer, or Eric, through marital pain in a Christ-like way takes hard work on their parts. Just as physical muscles are developed through regular and strenuous exercise, spiritual muscles are forged through hardship. James 1:3 says that we can experience joy in the midst of troubles because we *know* that hardship is producing a character quality in us—perseverance—and that will help us run the race of faith with endurance. Part of spiritual growth involves learning to *trust* that God knows what He is doing and that personal

Part of spiritual growth involves learning to *trust* that God knows what He is doing and that personal hardship will be used to mold Jennifer and Eric into the image of Christ

Pain has a way of getting our attention and warns us to stop doing something or it will get worse. The gift of consequences, sometimes painful consequences, are at times the most loving thing one can give a spouse in order to get him or her to stop, even if just for a minute, and look at what he or she is doing. If the wayward spouse begins to see the problem and admit it, he or she will probably need outside help to change it. This is a long process, but we

hardship will be used to mold Jennifer and Eric into the image of Christ. This, He says, is very, very good (Rom. 8:28-29).

We must help Jennifer and Eric remember: During marital difficulties, God has just thrust them into the gymnasium of spiritual maturity. Help them allow the Holy Spirit to be their personal trainer in the school of holiness. The process can be painful but the results are worth it.

⁵ Three situations that warrant this kind of drastic action: chronic infidelity, dangerous addictions, and spousal abuse. These serious marital sins—even crimes—are highly destructive, not only to a marriage, but also to the welfare of children who witness and experience such behaviors. Most of the time, those who are involved in these sins will not acknowledge the problem until they personally experience the painful consequences of their actions. In these cases, many variables beyond the scope of this article must be considered. But there is no doubt about one thing: It is sin and very serious sin at that. We must try to restore such a person.