

Dealing with Marital Problems

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Introduction

In our modern post-Christian culture, problems within professing Christian families have been on the rise for quite some time. This sad reality is due to a number of factors. (1) There has been a syncretism between the church and the world that has compromised both the effectiveness of churches and families in dealing with the various problems and temptations of life. There are many churches that are mixing biblical teaching with secular psychology and psychiatry in both preaching and counseling. The result of this adopting of heathenism and mixing it with Christian terminology is that sanctification in marriage relationships has been severely hindered; humanistic methods do not face the reality of sin, the need for salvation, the complete dependence on Scripture, and the necessity of faith and prayer in dealing with problems. One result is that many professing Christians, especially wives, are medicating their problems with drugs (e.g., Prozac, Valium, etc) instead of getting at the root of problems by dealing with sin in a biblical way. Another result is that professing Christians are taught to excuse sin by blame-shifting with talk about self-esteem or with a detailed analysis of wrongs from the distant past that should never be blamed for current sins.

(2) We live in a time when there is a great ignorance of Scripture and doctrine among professing Christians and even among pastors and elders. Biblical concepts of such crucial topics as covenant headship, submission, love, law, salvation and sanctification are often completely misunderstood. In fact, many pastors and counselors today have so imbibed the world's definition of love that their advice often does more harm than good. Given the current situation, this brief study will emphatically reject humanistic methods of counseling and will seek solutions only within the Bible. While pagan counselors can make common-sense statements that are true (e.g., don't beat your wife, be mean or commit adultery), they cannot get at the root of problems without recognizing the authority of Jesus Christ and His holy word.

In this examination of biblical problem solving in the home we will consider three different areas of thought: first, some preconditions of problem solving; second, identifying various problems; third, attacking problems biblically.

Preconditions of Problem Solving

As we discuss problem solving keep in mind that we are discussing methods for couples who claim to be Christian. Obviously an atheist, Buddhist, Hindu or communist who rejects the authority of Jesus and the Bible will not make use of or profit from the wisdom of God. Those who truly believe in Christ who are willing to set aside their own preconceptions, interests and prejudices, in order to submit their thinking and behavior to the Word of God, will greatly benefit from this study. The Savior said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall

make you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). There are certain things that are necessary for problems to be solved in the household.

(1) Both husband and wife must trust in Jesus for salvation and must believe in the infallibility, inspiration, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). When reading the Bible we never encounter Jesus or the apostles using Greek philosophy to deal with problems. The reason for this is very simple. They understood that the Bible is sufficient and perfect and does not need any human supplementation to meet all of our needs. Everything we need for salvation, faith and life is either explicitly set forth in the Bible or by the proper use of exegesis and logic, may be deduced from it. Paul even warns us that we cheat ourselves when we appeal to human philosophy (Col. 2:8); that man-made rules are of no value in subduing the sinful nature (Col. 2:28). Therefore, if a couple wants to deal with sins and problems in the home they must make a commitment to submit themselves to the teaching of Scripture no matter how they “feel” about it or whether or not they agree with it.

If a couple mixes pagan psychology with the Bible and refuses to submit to passages that rub them the wrong way, then they should not expect to make any progress. In fact, their ungodly attitude toward the Bible is one of their chief problems. Anyone who refuses to submit themselves to the teaching of the Bible refuses to submit to Christ as Lord. They need to search their own souls because a blatant continuous refusal to submit to Christ by obeying His word is very strong evidence of an unregenerate heart. They must repent and truly believe that God “has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). “The Bible is the Textbook for counseling since it contains all of the principles necessary for learning to love God and one’s neighbor. Extra-biblical data, therefore, are either unnecessary, irrelevant or contrary to those data provided by the Scriptures.”¹

(2) Both husband and wife must view themselves as one organic, covenantal body. In Genesis we read, “Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (2:22-24). With this passage in mind Paul writes, “So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph. 5:28-29).

Many couples view problem solving and communication as a kind of contest. Such thinking is self-centered and leads to one-upmanship in the relationship. Sometimes husbands are aggressive, mean and overbearing in order to manipulate their wives. Also, there are women who act rebelliously, emotionally and immaturely in order to try and manipulate their husbands. Such people are showing by their behavior that they do not understand the nature of marriage itself. Therefore, in order to have the proper attitude for change, husbands and wives must learn to view themselves as a covenantal unity with the same goals (the glory of God and the service of Christ and His kingdom) in life.

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God’s Flock: A Preacher’s Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling and Leadership* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 185.

In our modern pagan culture marriage and relationships are viewed in terms of self-fulfillment, happiness, romance, emotions and personal wants and needs. The rejection of the Bible in favor of secular humanism has led to a “what’s in it for me” attitude. This heathen mindset turns relationships into a kind of contest where personal wants and perceived needs are placed above the needs of the family as a whole. The results of this selfish, atomistic world view are miserable, argumentative marriages, high rates of adultery and abandonment, as well as exceptionally high divorce rates.

A biblical attitude which is rooted in a biblical understanding of marriage always keeps in mind the maxim: to help my spouse is to help myself and to hurt my husband or wife in any way hurts me. This understanding removes selfishness from the relationship and is foundational to biblical communication where problems, instead of spouses, are attacked.

(3) Husbands and wives must have a biblical understanding of the meaning of love. In our day, much preaching, counseling and advice is bad simply because many professing Christians have a corrupt, worldly concept of love. Not only have many evangelicals accepted the world’s idea that love is primarily a feeling or emotion, but they have also bought in to the antinomian concept that love means indulging a spouse instead of following biblical principles. Therefore, in counseling one hears comments such as: “Has your wife been rebellious, disrespectful, and selfish toward you, then what you need to do is to love her more by washing the dishes, taking her out to dinner and cutting her slack in her household duties.”

Although the Bible acknowledges that the term love can refer to a close friendship (Lk. 14:12; Mt. 10:37), affection (Gen. 29:18), covenant relationship (Ps. 36:7) and even infatuation or sexual attraction (2 Sam. 13:1-17), Scripture emphasizes that love is a duty. Love is the fulfillment of the law. Jesus said that the whole moral law or ten commandments can be summarized with the statement: “You shall love the Lord your God....and your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 2:37-40; cf. Lev. 19:18; Dt. 6:5). Christian love is the result of a believer’s regenerate heart coming in contact with the word of God and obeying it (see 1 Pet. 1:23; 2:2; 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:4, 7). Thus, Paul says the Spirit-filled life is characterized by love (Gal. 5:22). When the apostle speaks of the superiority of love in 1 Cor. 13 he describes love as a multi-faceted obedience to the law: freedom from unlawful jealousy, conceit, ostentation, arrogance, self-centeredness and resentment. Love is truthful, patient, kind, righteous, hopeful, benevolent and enduring. These are all moral qualities. The apostle John concurs.² He writes, “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him” (1 Jn. 1:3-5; cf. 3:10-12, 23; 4:20-21). “By this we know that we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 Jn. 5:2-3). “This is love, that we walk according to His commandments” (2 Jn. 6). Although John is likely writing to combat Gnostics who viewed love as something purely

² James treats love in the same manner as Paul and John. He writes, “If you fulfill the royal law, according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law. For whoever shall keep the law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (2:8-11).

intellectual, his words have equal value in refuting modern ideas about love as being purely emotional.

Why is the biblical definition of love as obedience to God's law, truth, word or command critical to solving marital problems? Because, while men and women do not have control over their feelings, they can obey God's precepts. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44), He did not mean, "have wonderful feelings about them." Instead He meant, "Treat them in accordance with the law of God." "The royal law of love" (Jas. 2:8). Once this biblical teaching is understood a married couple can solve all their problems by submitting to what God's word says. If a man or woman waits for feelings to get in line before they obey the Word, then the result will be a disaster because sometimes men do not have warm, fuzzy feelings about their wives. Sometimes women are angry with their husbands and do not want to submit to their God-given authority.

But, some may ask, "Is it not hypocritical to act contrary to one's feelings?" No, not at all! God expects us to do what is right regardless of our feelings. Paul says, "Be angry, and do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). In other words, do not act out your anger upon others but rather channel that emotion into a biblical response. If a man's wife acts rebelliously and disrespectfully toward him and he becomes angry, he must communicate to her in a biblical manner despite his feelings. The idea that we should follow our emotions leads to ethical chaos.

The biblical concept of love not only teaches us to avoid following our feelings but also destroys antinomian, permissive concepts of love. This author knows of numerous examples of men who knew what was right regarding a particular situation with a rebellious, domineering wife, yet gave in to their wife's sin in the name of "love." When Christian parents do this with their children, the result is spoiled, disobedient brats. When men do this with their wives they teach them that rebellion to authority pays off and thus they contribute to habitual sin patterns in their wife's behavior. With a biblical definition of love the husband can lead effectively by insisting in a firm but gentle manner that obedience to Scripture is non-negotiable. The husband and wife must both submit to God's authority if they want to please Christ.

(4) Husbands and wives must deal with their problems under the authority of a truly Reformed, local church of Christ. This point is important for a number of reasons.

a) Only the local church can provide the fellowship, examples and prayer support necessary that can help married couples grow in grace. This point, of course, presupposes that a husband and wife are attending the means of grace and participating in the various activities of the church.

b) Friendships are essential for providing godly examples to young couples. Older women can teach the younger women how to be effective managers of the household, how to love their husbands and teach their children (Tit. 2:4-5). Older men can help younger men deal with the various difficulties involved in leadership such as finances, childrearing, discipline, managing time and cultivating spirituality in the home. In our day, when many Reformed churches are small, with a flock that is spread out, it will take diligence and careful planning to stimulate Christian fellowship among the saints. This is one reason why God requires elders to be hospitable or given to hospitality (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8).

c) the Bible teaches that the elders of the local church must take action when problems in the home cannot be handled by the couple themselves. The elders can step in

and help a problem situation under two different circumstances. In one scenario, a couple realizes that they need assistance and asks for pastoral counseling. In this situation the pastor or an elder meets with the married couple on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and uses the Bible to solve the problem. The counseling sessions can last anywhere from six to twelve weeks depending on the difficulty of the problem and the willingness of the persons involved to repent of unbiblical behavior.

In another scenario the session of the church gets involved as a consequence of a husband or wife following Matthew 18:15ff. If there is a situation where a spouse is involved in sin and refuses to repent or to get good counseling, a second believer is brought in for admonition, to increase the gravity of the situation and give the offending party one more opportunity to repent before the problem goes before the session. The second party should be a mature believer who has a good knowledge of Scripture because any kind of church discipline presupposes that real sin is involved, that the accusation brought against a husband or wife can be objectively proven from the Bible. Some people are offended over trivial matters that are not sins, while others find malevolent meanings in innocent words or acts. The person who comes in as the witness in the second step of Matthew 18 needs to make sure that the charges of sin are justified and that the accusing spouse is not guilty of a judgmental, suspicious spirit which attributes bad motives where there are none. If the situation is difficult, there is nothing wrong with using a pastor or elder as the person for the second stage of admonition.

If the sinful behavior cannot be resolved by bringing in another Christian, or if the sin involved is scandalous or public (e.g., adultery, murder, wife beating, desertion, etc), then the marital problem must come before the session (i.e., the body of elders or consistory) of the church. When scandalous sins are involved such as adultery, desertion or wife beating the offending party will be immediately debarred from the Lord's table while the situation is dealt with. With sins that are not scandalous or already public the situation may be resolved with less stern measures.

We must keep in mind that the goal of each of the steps in Matthew 18:15ff is to convince and convict sinners of the error of their ways so that they repent. Only then can there be reconciliation in the marriage relationship. The goal is to retrieve lost sheep, to win over a brother. Therefore, admonition is to be done in a spirit of love, concern and humility (Phil. 2:2-4).³ Believers also must remember that church discipline is an act of love. One problem in many churches today is that people do not understand the biblical nature of church discipline. They view discipline in a negative manner as mean, unloving and even hateful. Thus, we find husbands and wives covering up and making excuses for the wicked behavior of a spouse. Sometimes such people will even transfer their membership to a church in which sin will not be disciplined. Such people, according to God's infallible word actually *hate* their husband or wife because they are enabling them to destroy their lives with sin. The same principle lies behind the Proverb which says, "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly" (13:24). Even excommunication, which is the final step of church discipline, has as its goal the repentance and restoration of the sinner. Paul writes, "In the name of our Lord

³ "Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:2-4).

Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). Church discipline is an ordinance of Christ for bringing sinners to repentance and for maintaining the purity of the local church (see Mt. 18:15-17; Jn. 20:23; 1 Thess. 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:20; Tit. 1:13; 2 Cor. 2:6; 1 Cor. 5:1-13).

Once a matter comes before the session the guilty party or parties must be held accountable for their actions and attend counseling for a period of time to ensure repentance and restitution in the relationship. If a person who is involved in unbiblical behavior is willing to admit their faults, repent and replace their sinful behavior with godly behavior, then even serious marital problems should be resolved within a few months. But, if a husband or wife is unwilling to admit they are wrong or repent the session must discipline that person and even excommunicate them if necessary. This statement may sound harsh to some, but it is totally biblical.

Once an unrepentant person is excommunicated, he is to be regarded as a heathen. Therefore, if adultery or desertion is involved the innocent party is free to remarry another Christian if he or she desires. If the excommunicated person is a genuine believer, he will repent and return to the local church. But if the innocent party has remarried, the guilty party must remain single. It is nearly always the case that when marital problems are so severe that a husband or wife refuses to repent and is willing to be excommunicated that such a person is an unregenerate idolater who worships self rather than God.

When marital problems are dealt with biblically within the context of the local church then: first, people get the help, advice and admonition they need; second, there are no ethical loose ends where rebellion can continue unhindered; third, corporate sanctification and the reconciliation process is strengthened and facilitated; fourth, the whole body is sanctified by the public application of discipline; fifth, God is glorified because the honor of His word is upheld and the heathen are not permitted to gloat over the church’s hypocrisy. We are protected from our own sinful pragmatism which often has the tendency to either be too harsh and arbitrary with a husband or wife or, even more likely, shirk our responsibility and excuse the sinful behavior of a spouse. God in His infinite wisdom has given us church discipline because He loves us and knows we need it. With the key of church discipline the church has the authority to redirect the covenantal spheres of the family and the civil magistrate in a biblical direction.

Identifying Problems in the Relationship

Many couples do not make progress in their relationship because they are so busy attacking each other and attempting to win arguments. Instead they ought to be spending their time constructively—identifying, analyzing and solving problems biblically. What often happens is that an argument begins over some issue and then instead of dealing with the issue, blame-shifting occurs, past faults are brought up, verbal attacks are made and the argument spirals out of control. How can this pattern be avoided so that Christian husbands and wives will attack problems in the home instead of each other? There are a number of things that need to be done.

The Christian husband, who is the head of the household, must take responsibility for poor communication in the home and implement biblical methods of Christian communication. If nasty arguments and fights are occurring in the home, then the husband is not doing his job as the leader of that house. There are a number of things that the husband needs to do to take change in this area.

(1) When an argument or verbal fight begins the husband must gently, firmly and lovingly insist that sins and problems be identified and that attacks on each other cease immediately. The husband can say, "Look honey, let's not argue or waste time attacking each other, instead lets sit at the table, get a pad and pencil and figure out what we are doing that is contrary to Scripture." If the husband takes the lead and with a soft answer refuses to fight, the argument will be nipped in the bud. After all, it takes two to tango.

(2) The husband must also lead by setting an example of biblical speech and by insisting on biblical speech during the identification of problem areas and their biblical analysis. The head of the household must use speech that promotes healing and leads to edification. He must likewise insist that while discussing problems the wife also control her speech and direct her conversation toward mutual edification. Obviously, if the husband does not control himself and loses his temper then he will not be able to effectively direct his wife's conduct. Paul says, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col. 4:6). There are many relevant passages that need to be learned to help us in this area. "There is one who speaks like the piercing of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health" (Pr. 12:18). "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones" (Pr. 16:24). "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Pr. 25:11). "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29).

These kinds of passages do not mean that sins or problems should be avoided but that they must be addressed in a spirit of Christian love and humility. Receiving personal satisfaction for our hurt feelings or for winning an argument must be set aside so that discussions can be effectively directed to identifying sins and seeking repentance.

(3) As an aspect of biblical speech the husband must lead by example and teaching in the area of uncontrolled anger. Because uncontrolled, unbiblical anger is both a problem and the chief cause of communication break down in the home this topic merits special attention. Therefore, we will spend a lot of time analyzing the problem of uncontrolled anger in order to defeat this common hindrance to biblical communication.

Excursus on Anger

Jay Adams says that "sinful anger probably is involved in 90 percent of all counseling problems."⁴ The reason for this sad reality is not hard to discern. Uncontrolled anger destroys communication and problem solving in the home because couples who do not control their tempers attack each other, instead of dealing with problems. Homes where husbands act like active volcanoes which are ready to blow at any moment or where husbands refuse to lead and control their wife's obnoxious angry behavior are

⁴ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 359.

homes where sanctification will halt or even reverse. The Bible portrays people who cannot control their anger as: without understanding, defenseless, without discretion, full of contention, and abounding in transgression. Such people, we are told, will suffer punishment. Uncontrolled anger is the starting point for a host of sins: verbal abuse, insults, false accusations, assault, wife beating, abandonment, unlawful divorce, murder, adultery, arson, war and genocide. Therefore, if we want to increase sanctification in our marriage relationship, avoid a breakdown in communication and the bitterness and resentment of unbiblical argumentation, then we must understand the biblical methods of dealing with anger.

Righteous vs. Unrighteous Anger

When dealing with anger in the marriage relationship one must keep in mind that anger in and of itself is not sinful. Jesus was angry with those who sold merchandise in the temple. He was also angry with the Pharisees. Yet He never committed sin. The psalmist says, “God judgeth the righteous, and *God is angry* with the wicked every day” (PS. 7:11, KJV). The Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to “be angry and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26). Anger is a God-given emotion which is good if used biblically. It is sinful if it is based on a false standard of righteousness.

One way of avoiding sinful anger in the marriage relationship is to make sure that you are not holding your spouse up to a false standard. One of the main reasons that Jesus was hated by the Jewish leaders in His day was because the Jews had a false interpretation of God’s law based on human tradition. When Jesus was the object of the Jew’s seething hatred because He healed a man on the Sabbath, He said: “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24). The obvious implication is that if the Jews truly understood the law of Moses they would not have been angry with His actions. Anger that is not based on a violation of God’s law is arbitrary and unjustified.

Before we get angry about an issue we need to ask ourselves an important question. “Is this issue really a violation of God’s word or am I imposing my own standard of right and wrong on the marriage relationship?” We must learn to impose the biblical doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (the Scripture alone) not our own standard of right and wrong.

For example, after a careful study of God’s word, Mr. Jones came to the conclusion that the celebration of extra-biblical holy days such as Christmas and Easter were unbiblical; and that, therefore, these pagan-papal holy days would no longer be celebrated in the home in order to honor Jesus Christ and His day—the Sabbath. Mrs. Jones reacts to this new decision by becoming angry and argumentative. Why? Because Mrs. Jones likes Christmas! However, before Mrs. Jones becomes angry and challenges her husband’s position she needs to first look to Scripture and ask herself: “Is my husband’s position contrary to God’s word (i.e., Can these man-made holy days be proven from Scripture)?” Further, she ought to consider whether her position is contrary to the Westminster Standards which are the pinnacle of Reformed thought. Anger that is not based on a violation of God’s word is unbiblical and spiritually dangerous. It is based on personal opinion or autonomous ethics and therefore it is wrong and sinful.

Therefore, it is important that husbands and wives study God's word, attend a church that preaches the Word which has competent elders and build up a library so they can look up difficult passages in good commentaries (e.g., Matthew Henry, John Calvin, William Hendricksen). The idea that a believer must not make a big issue of something that is not contrary to Scripture is obvious. However, it is violated by Christians all the time. The husband who is angry with his wife because she is not a gourmet cook, doesn't have a good figure or doesn't like to play golf is guilty of unrighteous behavior. He may buy her a cookbook and encourage her to practice new recipes, but he must not get mad or nit-pick over her cooking. A husband may encourage his wife to lose weight and buy her a membership at a women's health club. But, he must not get angry and tell his wife she is a fat, bloated pig. Remember, sanctification means that we must seek to conform to God's word in all areas of our lives. The wife has a moral obligation to submit to her husband's authority. This point, however, does not mean that the husband is a dictator with an arbitrary authority.

The wife that is angry with her husband because he is not wealthy or tall, or because he expects her to submit to his authority, is guilty of unrighteous behavior. God gave husbands and wives the ability to become angry in order to motivate them to biblical action against *sinful* behavior. Anger that is rooted in self-law, a lack of contentment, selfishness, covetousness or pride is sinful and must be repented of.

Once we understand this biblical teaching we can prioritize problems and issues in the marriage relationship which have resulted in contention. Things that are not a sin, that are small issues need to be overlooked in love or at least placed on the back burner. Annoyances which are not sin need to be treated in a completely different manner than issues of rebellion against God. The husband who yells at his wife when she accidentally burns dinner; yet, who does virtually nothing when she refuses to submit to his authority lacks biblical wisdom. Couples who have serious marital problems, who fight on a regular basis would be wise to sit down and make a list differentiating the major sin problems from personal annoyances.

Avoid Prejudging

Another way to avoid unrighteous anger is to avoid prejudging a situation. Often husbands and wives become angry with one another because of perceived wrongs that never even occurred. A spouse will judge his mate falsely because he lacks the necessary information to properly assess the situation. The Bible condemns this behavior as judging a matter before it is heard: "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Pr. 18:13). The biblical injunction to be slow to anger has a two-fold application. First, a person must be slow to anger in order to control his temper: "A quick tempered man acts foolishly" (Pr. 14:17). But there is also the element of taking the time to properly assess the situation. This involves being "quick to hear." "But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger" (Jas. 1:19). Husbands and wives need to be slow to speak and quick to hear in order to receive the information necessary to respond biblically to the situation. How many husbands have become angry, lost control and yelled at their wives over totally imaginary offenses? If your wife goes shopping and comes home an hour late for an important dinner engagement, don't immediately blow your stack and start yelling at her. Remain calm and ask questions until you have the

necessary information to ascertain what occurred. If she had a flat tire or got stuck in traffic, your anger is completely unjustified.

Even if your wife is guilty of some offense, anger must be controlled and directed at the problem. “Do not go out hastily to argue your case; otherwise, what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame?” (Pr. 25:8). “He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Pr.17:27). Never render a judgment in your mind against your spouse unless you know all the facts regarding the situation. Do not assume you know what your spouse is thinking. Do not assume that you know your spouse’s motives or opinions regarding a situation without first communicating and receiving the necessary information verbally. Do not prejudge. Remain calm, ask questions and give your spouse the benefit of the doubt.

This author has known individuals who have a tendency to clam up when they become angry, who instead of sitting down with a spouse and communicating about problems, will sit and fantasize about what they think the problem is. They will often read all sorts of malevolent meanings into things that have occurred or words that have been said without really knowing the intent of their spouse. We must remember that only God knows the heart (Isa. 66:18); that it is totally inappropriate to attempt to read between the lines, or assume that we know what our spouse is thinking. We must always give our spouse the benefit of the doubt; refuse to prejudge a situation without communicating and receiving adequate information; or, refuse to think malevolent thoughts about a spouse’s intent without proof. Paul says, “Let us pursue the things which make for peace and building up one another” (Rom. 14:19). Prejudging a matter is unloving, uncharitable and does not foster peace in a marriage relationship.

Don't Bring Up Past Sins

Another behavior that is rooted in unbiblical anger and which leads to unrighteous anger is bringing up past sins. When a husband or wife is confronted by a spouse with something he or she has done wrong, a very common unbiblical response is what is called the “you too” reaction. For example, a husband may confront his wife about neglecting certain homeschooling duties and the wife’s response is, “Yea, well you forgot to do family devotions last Tuesday.” While it may indeed be true that the husband has been neglectful in certain duties, it is totally inappropriate for the wife to bring up that fact when she is receiving correction. Why? Because the wife’s response in that context is not really intended to deal with the husband’s problem. It rather is intended as an attack to circumvent her husband’s admonition. The intent is to hurt, to divert attention from herself rather than promote sanctification. What is even worse in such a situation, is when the husband or wife begins bringing up past sins that have been confessed, repented of and have supposedly already been forgiven by the spouse. Such behavior is not only totally wrong because once a sin is dealt with and forgiven *it is never to be brought up again*, but also because it is really nothing more than an attack used to excuse one’s own *present* sinful behavior.

If this situation occurs the husband is responsible to stop the argument and gently point out that the current issue is not being addressed because biblical principles of forgiveness and communication are being violated. If the husband is guilty of this

behavior the wife must gently remind him that past sins that have been covered must not be rehashed.

If a believer is involved in a besetting sin or sins as a habitual pattern, then past behavior can be discussed with a spouse or counselor in order to receive help for deliverance from that particular sin problem. However, even in that situation present sins must be addressed and a spouse must not dredge up something from the past as a weapon or excuse to circumvent biblical correction.

Don't Respond to Anger with Anger

In order to stop sinful anger and destructive argumentation we must not respond unlawfully to unbiblical expressions of anger. The worst thing a person can do is to respond to uncontrolled anger with uncontrolled anger of his own. This leads to an escalation of hostilities between both parties. Such arguments increase both in volume and in hurtful speech. C. H. Spurgeon said, "It is useless to try to end a quarrel by getting angry over it; it is much the same as pouring oil on a fire to quench it, and blowing coals with the bellows to put them out." "The beginning of strife is like letting out water" (Pr. 17:14). "One hot word... begets another, and that a third, and so on, till it proves like the cutting of a dam; when the water has got a little passage it does itself widen the breach, bears down all before it, and there is then no stopping it, no reducing it."⁵ Therefore it is crucial to respond to uncontrolled anger biblically, before the dam breaks.

The biblical way to respond to uncontrolled anger is to give a soft answer. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Pr. 15:1). A gentle or soft answer refers to the sound level of an answer, as well as the content of an answer. "There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Pr. 12:18). You must answer in such a way as to subdue the anger of your spouse. This means taking the time to answer carefully. Don't blurt out the first thing that comes to mind but carefully reflect on a biblical response. "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil" (Pr. 15:28). One method of subduing wrath is to find a point of agreement (if possible) within your spouse's accusation or verbal attack. If you agree with a point of accusation made by your husband or wife, it makes it very difficult for your spouse to continue the argument. For example: "Yes, dear, you're right: I should have removed that dead tree before it had a chance to fall on the car. Let's sit down and discuss ways I can learn to not procrastinate in the future." The point is not to sweep one's spouse's uncontrolled anger under the rug but rather subdue it, in order to facilitate genuine communication instead of a useless argument. Uncontrolled anger cannot be dealt with until problem-solving communication is restored.

For those of us who have a sinful tendency to lose our temper we must remain quiet and avoid the urge to blow up in order to consider a biblical response to a situation. People given to blowing up have often been told to remain quiet and count to 10 (or 20, if necessary). We must use our Scripture-saturated intellect to control our passions. The husband or wife who is tempted to respond to anger in an unbiblical manner should memorize all the Scripture passages that discuss controlling anger. (Even before all the passages are memorized, write them down on 3x5 cards for quick reference in time of

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McClean, VA: MacDonald, n. d.), 3:889.

need. When you are tempted to blow up, you should quietly meditate on appropriate passages of Scripture). The husband that is given to emotional outbursts should explain to his wife that he is learning to replace his unbiblical response; therefore, she should understand that he needs some time to meditate on Scripture in order to avoid a blowup. Likewise, the wife who is given to clamming up (i.e., the silent treatment) should also memorize the anger passages. She must learn that cutting off communication is not the way to solve problems and bring healing to the relationship. The first step should be faithfully practiced until remaining quiet and looking toward the Scriptures for solutions becomes a habit. The goal is rehabilitation. One must put off blowing up or clamming up and put on a quiet, well-reasoned, scriptural response to the situation.

While a person given to blowing up must learn to be quiet, maintain composure, meditate on the appropriate biblical passages and give a soft answer, the person who clams up (i.e., who likes to give his spouse the silent treatment) must also learn to control anger and instead communicate with his spouse. Clamming up (like blowing up) does not lead to constructive problem-solving; in fact, it is often used to punish one's spouse. When a spouse locks his anger inside, he not only cuts off constructive communication but also harbors a reservoir of resentment against his spouse. When someone internalizes anger and refuses to deal with the difficulty that caused the anger, unresolved problems pile up. The unresolved problems and the bitterness and resentment they cause destroy fellowship and joy in the marriage relationship.

Serious marital problems are often the result of minor problems piling up. When problems and bitterness pile up, sometimes the husband and wife don't know where to begin. It is not uncommon for biblical counselors to encounter couples who are fighting over unresolved issues that are years old. The resentment from unresolved issues has poisoned the relationship. Therefore, it is often necessary for couples who are having difficulties in the present to deal with unresolved problems from the past. This will include confession and forgiveness. "When sins are confessed, it is like picking something up that was dropped on the carpet. If a person learns to pick things up immediately, a thousand things can be dropped on the carpet, and the home will remain clean. But if things are only picked up once every six months, the result will be an overwhelming house cleaning job. To continue the illustration, some homes are so messed up that those responsible for cleaning simply do not know where to start. They do not necessarily like the way it is, but they are simply overwhelmed. But such things always accumulate *one at a time*. If they had been picked up as fast as they had been dropped, then the home would have remained clean."⁶

The Bible forbids holding anger within. The spouse who clams up must learn to direct the anger toward problem solving and reconciliation. Paul says, "Be angry, and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27). Paul warns Christians that if anger is not dealt with immediately and resolved biblically, then believers are giving the devil an opportunity. How many people have done things in anger that they later regretted? The spouse who has the habit of clamming up must stop the silent treatment and start communicating until the problem is resolved.

A biblical example of internalizing anger and giving the devil an opportunity is set forth in Genesis 4:5-7. "But for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you

⁶ Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 1995), 55.

angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” God had no regard for Cain’s offering, for God required a blood sacrifice. Cain became very angry. He internalized the anger and became depressed. Cain was angry at God and his brother. God who is rich in mercy went to Cain and spoke gently to him. He told Cain that the way to get out his depression was to obey God and do the right thing. Cain gave God the silent treatment. God went to Cain and communicated in a kind way. Cain refused to listen and ignored God’s advice. The result was the murder of his brother, righteous Abel. It is interesting that often after an employee goes berserk and shoots several fellow-employees, his neighbors often say, “He was such a quiet, mild, friendly guy.” Yes, but only on the outside!

Likewise, it is very common to meet a man or a woman who without any warning at all is abandoned by a spouse or even served divorce papers. While many people in our culture think that clamming up is acceptable while blowing up is not because it has the appearance of composure, it must be viewed for what it really is—an unloving act which is a form of rebellion against God. The person who clams up takes sinful thoughts and attitudes and nurtures them in their heart. For such people it is only a matter of time before their hidden sin becomes publicly manifest.

A man who has a pattern of clamming up must examine his behavior and learn to replace it with a godly counterpart. Mrs. Jones had a very sinful response to anger which was to get up in huff, walk to her bedroom, slam the door and then lock it. In doing so, she was cutting off all means of communication, harboring sinful anger in her heart and robbing her husband of the opportunity to lead in a biblical manner. After receiving good counseling Mrs. Jones learned to respond to anger in a biblical manner. Now when she becomes angry she retains her composure, respectfully tells her husband that there are certain problems that need to be addressed and asks for him to come sit at the table where issues can be discussed and resolved. With her new biblical approach to problem solving her relationship to her husband has blossomed, her children are learning from a godly example and Christ is honored because His Word is being obeyed.

Don't Make Excuses for Sin

A question often raised by a husband or wife in a difficult relationship is: “What should I do when my spouse says that he or she simply cannot control themselves?” A spouse who claims that he cannot control himself ought to be reminded of the fact that virtually everyone, whether a professing Christian or not, has learned to control their temper under certain circumstances. The man who screams at his wife and kicks a hole in the wall or the woman who pulls out her hair and locks herself in the bathroom, both control themselves in public (e.g., at church, a restaurant, the shopping mall). Sadly, when people are alone, they like to “let it all hang out.” But, if these same people can act civilly in church or at the mall, then obviously their claim that they cannot control themselves is untrue. Such people lack self control at home because they *refuse* to control themselves. A husband or wife who acts like an idiot at home must stop making excuses and admit that he or she needs to repent. We must be concerned about what God, who sees and knows everything, thinks rather than what our pagan neighbors think.

Another question that is often asked relates to people who argue that they cannot control themselves because they had certain very bad things happen to them when they were children (e.g., molested by a parent or relative; parents were physically abusive; raised in an uncaring foster home; parents were murdered, etc). The idea behind this question is that some people bear permanent scars that can never really be healed, that at best these problems can only be subdued through psychiatric treatment and the use of pharmaceuticals (e.g., Valium, Prozac). Is it true that there are some people who are so scarred psychologically that they will never really be able to function as they should? No, it is not true! While there is no question that horrible past events can affect our thinking, the Bible teaches that the redemptive work of Jesus saves us from the guilt and the power of sin. Whatever we were before we believed in Jesus has been crucified with Christ and has risen with Him to a new, redeemed life (Rom. 6:1-18). “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Paul says that everyone who is savingly united to Christ experiences a radical change. Union with the Savior is so transforming that it results in a new creation. This radical change is effected by the Holy Spirit who raises dead, darkened, hardened hearts and implants new spiritual life that affects every aspect of our being. Because of our union with Christ old “opinions, views, plans, desires, principles and affections are passed away; new views of truth, new principles, new apprehensions of the destiny of man, and new feelings and purposes fill and govern the soul.”⁷ Philip E. Hughes writes, “When Paul declares that for the Christian old things have passed away, the tense of the verb (aorist) points back to a definite moment or event, namely, the experience of the new birth. It is then that the old things—the distinctions, prejudices, misconceptions, and enslavements of the former unregenerate way of life—assume the character of pastness. ‘Behold, they are become new’: note the tense again (this time perfect), indication that the old things became and continue to be new; for the newness of God’s creation is not a newness that in course of time palls and grows old and outmoded; it is a newness that is everlastingly new.”⁸

The apostle’s infallible, inspired teaching gives all believers incredible hope no matter what has occurred in the past because Christ has achieved a comprehensive victory over sin, death and the powers of darkness, and, therefore, we must live in terms of what the blessed Savior has done. In fact, the teaching of Scripture is so clear on this issue that we must decide whether we are going to submit to biblical authority or place our faith in the wicked secular priesthood of the modern psychiatrists and psychologists. The latter are the very same evil men that approve of homosexual perversion, infanticide, abortion, sexual immorality, unjust divorce and the de-Christianization of modern culture.

Further, the word of God never accepts any excuses for sinful behavior. The Bible never sanctions the modern humanist idea that some people because of genetics, or upbringing, or the “injustice of society” are *driven* to commit crimes and thus are somehow not responsible. If we accept modern humanism’s rejection of personal responsibility in favor of “mental illness” or “criminal insanity” then we open the door to pagan savagery in the churches. Accordingly, like our heathen culture, churches will

⁷ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 517.

⁸ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 203.

justify the guilty and spit on innocent victims. We observe the continued corruption of counseling in evangelical churches where it is assumed that both husband and wife are guilty of sin before any evidence is even considered. If a spouse is *driven* by his or her upbringing, or chromosomes, or some bad childhood experience to violate Scripture, then the innocent party is unloving and insensitive to insist on repentance instead of therapy. Such unbiblical nonsense is fully in accord with the modern priesthood of psychiatry and psychology because secular humanism is intrinsically hostile to God. Modern psychiatry and psychology have unbiblical presuppositions regarding God, the Bible, man, sin, the law and so on. Once churches reject responsibility as the humanists do, then the ability to deal with sinful behavior objectively, in accordance with God's law and the discipline of Matthew 18:15ff, is compromised and replaced with the subjective opinions of the counselor. Under such circumstances, hope is lost and counseling sessions can last for years because the root cause of the problem—sin—is ignored. Once, however, responsibility for sin is acknowledged there is hope because repentance and full restoration in the relationship can follow. The sad reality is that some professing Christians seek out heathen therapists or seriously compromised evangelical counselors precisely because they do not want their sinful behavior challenged. "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so" (Jer. 5:30-31).

Professing Christians who flock to the secular priesthood for their Prozac or Valium, instead of going to the true prophets of God (i.e., thoroughly Reformed pastors and elders) and who refuse to submit to God's law word are showing their true colors. They are excuse makers who reject God and His authority. Because they are in love with their sin and worship the idol of human autonomy, they prefer the counsel of Philistines to that of God and His chosen people. Their destruction will be just.

Other Principles of Communication

Once anger is dealt with and the channels of communication are working effectively, the husband should lead and direct this energy toward identifying problems. While problems are being identified the husband has a responsibility to make sure that unlawful anger does not reappear in the discussion (e.g., bringing up past sins, hasty generalizations [e.g., "you always," "you never," etc], insults or personal attacks (e.g., "Yeah, well you're a fat, bloated pig"). The husband must lead by example by not losing his temper, by using edifying speech and by direction. As the leader in the home he must make sure that both he and his spouse don't lose focus. With some couples, once tempers have subsided, problems are swept under the rug and not really dealt with. The result is that problems are left to fester, grow and appear with renewed vigor another day. The husband who thinks he is acting lovingly because he doesn't confront his wife or children about their sins is deceiving himself. Sin (and the problems that attend it) does not disappear on their own. They must be identified and dealt with biblically. There are a number of things that are necessary for identifying problems in the marriage relationship.

(1) In order to deal with marital problems effectively a couple will need privacy, time and an effective work area. If there are children in the home the couple needs to place them in a separate area so that the couple will not be interrupted and so that private comments will not be overheard. The children can watch a good video or go play at a

friend's house for a time. The couple needs an atmosphere where they are not rushed, where they can relax, where they can meditate on the situation at hand. The kitchen table is an ideal area for communication because it makes writing down ideas easy and there is room for Bibles, study aids, concordances and good Christian books on the family.

(2) When identifying problems, couples need to be honest with each other and with themselves. Communication must be truthful: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16). Paul says that we are to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). John says that our love must be expressed "in deed and in truth" (1 Jn. 3:18). "Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25).

If a husband or wife is willing to lie about their sinful behavior, then there is no point in discussing problems at all. The lying must be dealt with before other issues can be effectively addressed. A husband and wife are supposed to have the most intimate human relationship possible. But if one or both parties are lying, useful communication is clouded by doubt. Communication under such circumstances degenerates into pleasantries, small talk and saying what one thinks the other person wants to hear. The deep, intimate searching communication necessary for problem solving and mutual edification is lost.

If there is to be honesty in interpersonal communication then first there must be honesty with oneself. The ability of people who are wedded to certain sins to deceive themselves is truly astounding. As Jeremiah notes, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it" (17:9)? Self deception involves a failure to acknowledge or apply the ethics of Scripture to our own specific situation. It is common of people who are in love with a particular sin to view themselves as an exception to God's law. Therefore, in counseling situations pastors frequently hear excuses for sin that are rooted in the distant past (e.g., "my parents abused me") or are directed against a spouse (e.g., "internet porn is acceptable in my situation because my wife doesn't like sex"). As we noted in a previous section, God does not accept any excuses for sinful behavior...period. We must admit we are wrong, stop making excuses, and confess our wrong behavior to our spouse. Lying to a husband or wife is totally unloving and selfish. Lying implicitly says, "You are unimportant. I cannot trust you to help me with this problem in my time of need." Lying is an implicit denial of the oneness of the marriage relationship. If the husband and wife are working together for the same biblical goals of mutual sanctification, godly children and helpful companionship, then lying is irrational. It makes about as much sense as allied troops ignoring the enemy and firing on their own positions.

(3) If problems are to be solved there must be a willingness to communicate verbally. Christians are not mind readers. Husbands and wives should not have to guess what their spouse is thinking. Paul says, "Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of a man, which is in him" (1 Cor. 2:11). There are people who are not trying to excuse sin or manipulate a spouse who simply don't say much. Such people tend to keep their thoughts to themselves.

If a man is married to a non-communicative woman then he must gently encourage her to communicate her thoughts on a particular issue. It is his job as the leader to make sure that the channels of communication are continually open. He can facilitate open communication by asking very specific applicable questions. For example,

“Dear, I am getting the impression that you are upset about something I said or did today; could you please elaborate? If you are angry about something I want to make sure that this situation is resolved biblically.”

If a woman is married to a non-communicative man then she must respectfully remind him of his duty to talk with her so that problems are identified and dealt with. Also, if a husband is not spending enough time each day in one-on-one conversation with his wife then he must be gently reminded of his marital responsibilities. Both husbands and wives are responsible to organize their time effectively in order to give the proper verbal attention and affection to each other. Many Americans are so preoccupied with entertainment, vanities and extracurricular activities that problems and even normal, everyday communication is neglected.

The husband and wife should work at open communication until it becomes a habit in the relationship. This will involve putting into place a number of simple principles. An important element in open communication is listening to each other carefully. This means paying attention—no daydreaming. Husbands and wives should not give the impression that what the other has to say is unimportant or stupid. It also means asking questions. If a spouse does not understand what has been said they should ask questions until the other's thought is fully understood. If one is married to a person who is very quiet and not naturally open, one should gently ask questions to stimulate conversation.

Another important element in open communication is the need to be clear and direct in one's speech. Husbands and wives must avoid being vague and indirect in communication. Beating around the bush and speaking ambiguously leaves one open to misunderstanding. For example, a woman who is about to go to the hairdresser asks her husband how he would like her to have her hair styled. The husband would like it styled a certain way but says, "Have it done however you want, dear." If, when his wife returns from the hairdresser, he is disappointed, whose fault is it? It is his fault. The wife communicated effectively but the husband did not reveal his true wishes. Spouses who do not reveal their thoughts on an issue because they do not think it is important (or are afraid to offend) create problems. Miscommunication can lead to anger, resentment and arguments over issues that really are inconsequential. When couples are not open and honest with each other, minor problems fester and develop into major blowups. Unresolved issues accumulate in the marriage relationship until the problems seem unmanageable. Marriage counselors are constantly hearing husbands and wives say to their spouses: "Why didn't you tell me about that?" "Why didn't you tell me that bothered you?" "Why didn't you just ask me to do such and such?" The principle of open communication is so simple, yet it is commonly neglected in our day. It is tragic that many marriages have failed over something necessary yet so simple. Husbands and wives should not be afraid to speak openly and clearly, as long as they do so in a gentle, loving manner. It's time to stop the guessing game, trying to read each other's minds, trying to read in between the lines. Marital communication should not be a puzzle or enigma; it should be open and clear.

With open communication husbands and wives will not only avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary arguments but will also get to know one other more intimately as time progresses. The focus for couples in our pagan society has been on entertainment and sensuality. Couples are dancing, going to movies, partying and having

a lot of sex. As a consequence, many American newlyweds know a lot about each other's anatomy but little about each other's personality. Couples need to study each other; getting to know each other is a top priority. "The television series *The Newlywed Game*, and other shows that match husbands' and wives' answers, seem funny, but really they are tragic. They reveal not the rare or unusual but the commonplace. They provide an ominous warning that couples simply do not know each other. People are not doing their homework."⁹

Attacking the Problems

Once communication is functioning effectively and various problems have been identified, then the difficulties must be resolved biblically. The Bible teaches that sinful habits must be dealt with in two ways. There must first be a putting off of sin. The apostles refer to this aspect of change as "putting off of your former conduct" (Eph. 4:21); putting "to death the [sinful] members" (Col. 3:5); a cleansing of oneself from all filthiness in mind and body (2 Cor. 7:1; 2 Tim. 2:21); an abstaining from fleshly lusts (1 Pet. 2:11) and sexual immorality (1 Thess. 5:22); and, a bringing of our body into subjection (1 Cor. 9:27). Change depends on knowledge of what the Bible teaches, self-control or a willingness to obey Scripture, self-sacrifice, a faith or reliance on Christ and a dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. We must take up His cross before we can follow Him in holiness (Mk. 8:34). This step is really quite simple: put off your sin problems—put them to death, eliminate them completely.

Biblical change does not only involve eliminating sin; it also has a positive side. The putting off of sin must be replaced with new habits of righteousness. The various sins that were causing problems in your marriage relationship must be replaced with godly counterparts. The key to solving marital problems is not just to abhor what is evil but also to cling to what is good (Rom. 12:9). Paul tells us, "to overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21); to "not be conformed the world but rather be transformed by the renewing of our mind" (Rom. 12:2). While our outward man is perishing our inward man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). If we want to have a happy marriage we must progressively put off the old person we were apart from Christ and put on the new man created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). If we walk according to the Spirit then we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

There is great biblical wisdom in this two-factored process. Since we are creatures of habit, the only truly effective way to break a sinful habit is to replace it with a godly counterpart so that we are progressively rehabilitated toward godly behavior. When Paul addresses the problem of sinful sexual desire in 1 Corinthians he tells young men and women that the solution to illicit lust is Christian marriage (1 Cor. 7:22ff). He tells people who lie to replace that behavior with speaking the truth (Eph. 4:25). Believers who have a habit of corrupt, impure, malicious speech are instructed to replace such speech with edifying words (Eph. 4:29). "Change is a *two-factored process*. These two factors always must be present in order to effect genuine change. Putting off will not be permanent without putting on. Putting on is hypocritical as well as temporary, unless it is accompanied by putting off."¹⁰

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *The Intimate Marriage*, 16.

¹⁰ *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 177.

Jay E. Adams refers to the biblical process of change as dehabitation and rehabilitation. “Whenever repentance occurs, the new process begins. Note especially that rehabilitation does not wait *until* dehabitation is complete. The two processes must be simultaneous.”¹¹ In sanctification old sinful patterns are progressively replaced by new righteous patterns. No matter how bad your marriage relationship is or how many serious problems you have, if both spouses are willing to submit to Scripture a terrible marriage can become a wonderful happy marriage. As we consider the put off, put on dynamic there are a number of important things to consider.

If change is to occur there must be a *commitment* from both the husband and wife. The process of change cannot occur until repentance occurs. Repentance involves a change of mind regarding a past behavior where it is openly acknowledged to be wrong and where there is a commitment to replace that sinful behavior with godly behavior. Obviously, if a husband or wife does not think that he or she doing anything wrong, then he or she won’t acknowledge the problem or repent of that behavior. When one observes a professing Christian couple who have had the same problems for many years, then one can safely assume that either this couple is either extremely ignorant of Scripture, or simply refuses to submit to the teaching of God’s word. Such a refusal is usually saturated with various excuses. If a husband or wife makes a commitment to change but does not follow through on that decision, then their repentance was insincere. True repentance will bring forth the fruits of repentance.

If there is a situation where a commitment to change is not forthcoming or a commitment is insincere then Matthew 18:15ff needs to be put into practice. Biblical change is always to be done in accordance with membership in the local church. If counseling is needed it should be given by the local pastor or elder. This is important because: (a) the Bible does not recognize secular, pagan therapy; (b) God’s word does not authorize para-church counseling centers; and (c) church discipline will need to be applied to parties who refuse to repent.

The husband and wife must view biblical change within the context of faith in Christ and a reliance on the Holy Spirit. This means that: (a) The couple expects victory over sin and steady progress in their relationship because Jesus has already obtained definitive sanctification for them. (b) The husband and wife must view all problems of obedience in the context of the lordship of Christ and their love of the Savior. The problems in marital relationships are *not* simply issues of respectful obedience to a husband or loving service and nurture toward a wife, but *ultimately* are rooted in a willingness to love, obey and serve Christ. A desire and willingness to repent and do the right thing is a reflection of one’s love and obedience to Christ. This Christocentric perspective ought to make obedience a joy instead of a burden. A husband or wife who refuses to repent of a known sin after repeated admonition is not a Christian. After the appropriate steps of church discipline are followed the unrepentant party must be excommunicated. (c) The couple must rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit by praying often for God to sanctify them; keep them from stumbling (Jude 2:4); preserve them into the great day (1 Pet. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:18), and lead them not into temptation (Mt. 6:13). (d) A husband and wife must diligently search the Scriptures for the Bible is the sole guide and authority in the marriage relationship.

¹¹ *Shepherding God’s Flock*, 178.

(3) The husband and wife must work hard for biblical change. This effort will involve a number of activities. For example, a list of problems needs to be made for both the husband and the wife. If problems are to be dealt with effectively then a number of distinctions or categorizations must be made in this step.

a) One must carefully make distinctions between things that are truly sins and those that are just annoyances which need to be overlooked in love. Obviously, if there is something that is not sinful that our husband or wife finds offensive we would like to accommodate our spouse. But when sin problems have accumulated over many months or even years, such issues must take priority. In other words, verbal insults and disrespectful behavior take precedence over failing to put the toilet seat down or forgetting to put the cap on the toothpaste. A husband is a poor leader if he lacks the wisdom to make distinctions between serious habitual sin patterns and minor areas of disagreement or annoyance.

b) In dealing with problems one must make a distinction between sin itself and the problems that are a result of sin. For example, there are many people who suffer from depression. Depression can be caused by grief when a loved one dies or when some great calamity occurs. It may be caused by damage to the brain (e.g. a skull fracture). But, it often is a symptom of sinful behavior. Depression can be the result of internalizing anger and refusing to deal with it biblically (e.g., Cain, Gen. 4:7-9). It can result from a lack of contentment or sinful lust (e.g., Amnon, 2 Sam. 13:2-4). Judas became depressed and committed suicide as a result of betraying an innocent man (Mt. 3-5). Did Cain, Amnon or Judas need to go to a psychiatrist to receive a prescription of Prozac? No! The modern medical model of depression does not deal with the underlying sins that lead to depression but merely seeks to eliminate symptoms through the use of drugs.

In the United States there is an epidemic of drug use related to depression or anxiety. Drugs are even dispensed to millions of children for so-called “hyperactivity.” Hundreds of thousands of teenagers are taking drugs such as Prozac to lift their spirits. The use of such drugs is based on a materialistic, medical model of reality instead of the biblical world view. Will the use of such drugs really cure “hyperactivity” or depression? No, they most certainly will not! If a person merely medicates himself with prescription drugs or alcohol to eliminate depression, then what happens when the drug wears off? The person who took the drug will return to their depression. Why? Because the underlying cause of depression was ignored. Therefore, if a person is taking a drug for a problem that is moral in nature and this fact is not dealt with, then theoretically such a person would have to remain on a harmful drug indefinitely. This scenario may be a boon to doctors and pharmaceutical companies, but it is a disaster for marriages and families. The prolonged use of drugs is dangerous because the person taking them becomes dependent on them; the drugs tend to lose their effectiveness over time and have to be increased in dosage or substituted; and drugs are unhealthy for the body and mind. Some drugs damage the liver and other vital organs, while others can make permanent negative charges upon the brain itself. The only time a professing Christian ought to be taking drugs that affect the brain is when there is a proven physiological reason to do so such as seizures caused by brain damage (e.g., a car accident).

The Bible discusses depression (e.g. Gen. 4:5-7), worry (e.g. Mt. 6:25ff) or anxiety (e.g. Phil. 4:6-7) yet never tells believers that drugs or medical doctors are the solution. God’s word deals with these problems in terms of faith or trust and obedience.

The put off/put on dynamic of sanctification applies to attitudes, feelings, and thoughts just as it does to our outward behavior. Americans are increasingly looking to the use of drugs for problems (depression, hyperactivity, etc) because they do not embrace biblical ethics, the concept of discipline for sanctification and have been taught the materialistic, medical model of reality (e.g., “alcoholism” is a disease). Paul rebukes the Prozac generation with these words: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7; see Mt. 6:25ff where Jesus instructs His disciples on how to conquer the sin of worry).

c) When dealing with problems one must see if there are sins that are the underlying cause of other sins. As Paul says, “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these things we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:6-10). Often men who are involved in pornography have not learned to be content with their wives and don’t find satisfaction in the marriage bed. Therefore, when there is a problem with illicit lust married men must not only memorize passages that discuss lust, fornication and their deadly consequences, but also passages that deal with contentment.

All sins begin in the heart because external temptations receive their power from our inner lusts. “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown brings forth death” (Jas. 1:14-15). Therefore, it is very important that we acknowledge sinful thoughts and attitudes that lead to other sins.

For example, Mr. and Mrs. Jones have serious financial problems because Mrs. Jones spends money in a very irresponsible manner. She violates the biblical principle of avoiding debt by overusing credit cards. She also exhibits worldliness by accumulating unneeded fashions and trinkets from the mall. Mr. Jones has repeatedly asked his wife not to use the credit cards or to spend money irresponsibly. But, Mrs. Jones continues to disregard her husband’s instructions. While Mrs. Jones is guilty of a lack of contentment, covetousness, worldliness and of placing her family under the slavery of heathen bankers, her central problem is a rejection of covenant headship, that is her responsibility to submit to her husband’s authority. Her internal attitude of hostility to authority was manifested externally by a variety of sins. Therefore, in this case the husband must lead by focusing their attention on the central issue. If Mrs. Jones acknowledges that she has a problem with authority and she repents of that sin, then her other problems can be dealt with in turn, as long as her husband is willing to lead.

d) As the couple constructs the list of sins and problems it is important that agreement between both parties is secured on the content and priorities of the list. If there is not complete agreement regarding the problem areas, then the husband must lead and communicate until there is agreement. “Can two walk together unless they are agreed” (Amos 3:3)? If agreement cannot be secured, then another Christian who is competent to

counsel must be brought in to aid the couple. Concurrence is crucial because if a husband or wife refuses to acknowledge sinful behavior then he or she will obviously not repent.

For example, Mr. White occasionally becomes drunk and then verbally abusive to his wife and family. While Mr. White was willing to admit the verbal abuse was wrong he defended his right to drink to excess with the excuse that drunkenness is allowable in the home. After the pastor met with Mr. and Mrs. White the husband was convinced that his argument could not be supported by Scripture and made a commitment to stop abusing alcohol. Once Mr. Jones' drinking was under control he stopped mistreating his wife.

(2) Once sins and problems are noted and agreed upon by both partners then appropriate passages need to be identified that not only condemn sinful behavior but also deal with appropriate replacements for past sinful behavior. By doing this the couple is able to set biblical goals of rehabilitation. As noted in our discussion of anger it is very helpful to write down appropriate passages on cards for memorization. When seeking biblical solutions for problems, there are some important things to keep in mind.

a) One must use standard Protestant procedures of biblical interpretation. That is, the historical, grammatical and theological interpretation of a passage. Mystical and erroneous understandings of Scripture will not achieve results.

b) Do not hesitate to use good Reformed counseling materials in analyzing problems, setting goals and evaluating progress. In our day when many elders are incompetent and unqualified the head of the household must make every effort to be competent to counsel his own family. A good start would be to read Jay E. Adams *Competent to Counsel* and *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. Do not read books that use secular psychology. They are not only a waste of time, they are also positively harmful.

c) As part of the rehabilitation process both the husband and wife should have homework assignments that deal with specific problem areas. If a couple has spent themselves into a debt crisis, then they ought to read Christian books and articles dealing with debt and Christian stewardship. If a husband is a poor leader then he ought to read books and articles on the Christian family and covenant headship. If a wife has a pattern of refusing to submit to her husband then she needs to study materials that bring conviction and give appropriate application. Good resources include the writings of the Puritans as well as modern Reformed books, articles and sermons (e.g., see www.sermonaudio.com). Do not be afraid to go to the elders of the church to get help finding good materials.

d) Husbands and wives should be encouraged to discuss the things that are being learned from Scripture and various Christian materials and encourage one another's progress. Couples are both edified and encouraged by learning what the other person has discovered that will help them in the process of sanctification. The process of rehabilitation should not be gloomy but exciting. Many couples who have had serious problems in their relationship are overjoyed when they discover that their new found knowledge of and obedience to Scripture has such amazing benefits in the relationship.

(3) When discussing sins and problems in the marriage relationship it is important to note the role of confession and forgiveness in the reconciliation process. After the problem is discussed and genuine confession takes place the husband or wife must be forgiven. Forgiving a repentant spouse is not optional; it is required by Jesus Christ:

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Mt. 18:21-22). “But if you do not forgive, neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk. 11:26). Genuine forgiveness is crucial; for without it, reconciliation has not occurred. The problem is left unresolved. Paul says, “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Eph. 4:26). The Bible clearly teaches that husbands and wives must be reconciled the very same day that the problem occurred; it cannot be put off until the next day. True forgiveness must be extended to your spouse, even when the offense was great. If forgiveness is not extended, then all the preceding steps were in vain; reconciliation has not taken place.

Note, whenever sin is involved it is simply not enough to say “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.” Jay Adams explains why: “An apology is an inadequate humanistic substitute for the real thing. Nowhere do the Scriptures require, or even encourage, apologizing. To say ‘I’m sorry’ is a human dodge for doing what God has commanded.”¹² The biblical response is to say: “Yes, I am guilty. I have sinned against you. Will you forgive me?” The reason that an apology is inadequate when actual sin has occurred is because it does not elicit a proper biblical response. When a Christian admits his guilt and then says: “Will you forgive me?” the one who has come to confront him regarding his sin must say: “Yes, I forgive you.” This places the ball in his court. He must either explicitly forgive or openly rebel against God. When the brother says, “I forgive you,” he promises *never* to bring the matter up against you; *never* to bring the matter up again to others (even his wife); and *never* to bring the matter up to himself by dwelling on it and dredging up bitterness, etc.¹³ This, beloved is biblical reconciliation. Apologies are fine when sin is not involved (e.g., when you accidentally bump into someone at the shopping mall) but they should never be used as a substitute for biblical reconciliation where sin has been committed.

Remember, the purpose of learning biblical communication, problem solving and reconciliation is so that sins and problems are not unresolved and left to accumulate until a major crisis develops. The husband or wife who refuses to forgive a repentant spouse is harboring resentment that will lead to greater sin and conflict. The person who offers forgiveness without repentance and true reconciliation also will destroy the marriage relationship. Forgiveness and reconciliation without *genuine repentance* is antinomian and implicitly teaches the unrepentant spouse that sin is acceptable. Many evangelicals today do not understand the biblical concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation and thus it is not uncommon to find wives saying they forgive an adulterous husband who is still mired in sexual sin. Although this type of forgiveness is spoken of as wonderful and loving, in reality is extremely destructive and hateful. When forgiveness is extended to people who refuse to repent and confess their sin, Matthew 18:15ff is set aside and the judicial process that Jesus instituted to bring repentance is short-circuited. Every situation involving sin must be dealt with biblically until true reconciliation occurs.

(4) For believers who are working for rehabilitation of long-standing marital problems time should be set aside each week to evaluate progress. An important aspect of sanctification is to learn from one’s mistakes. The Puritans were so serious about holiness

¹² Jay E. Adams, *More than Redemption: A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 221.

¹³ *Ibid*, 222.

that a common practice among them was to keep a spiritual diary. Every night before bedtime they would evaluate the thoughts, words and behavior of each day to see where progress was needed, to confess their sins and to pray for specific areas. A couple ought to keep working toward short and long term goals. Some important questions to ask oneself during evaluation are: Did I continue to saturate my mind with the appropriate Scripture verses? Did I seriously attempt to control my environment to avoid temptation? Did I place my spouse first this week or was I being self-centered and selfish? Did I use Scripture to deal with the first motions toward sin by doing something edifying instead of giving in to sinful thoughts, words or deeds. Did I deal with every problem that arose promptly so that reconciliation was achieved before bedtime? Did I lead my wife effectively in a loving, biblical way? Did I submit to my husband in a prompt manner with a respectful attitude? Did I pray for God's assistance in overcoming sinful habits?

These kinds of questions are simple yet crucial in evaluating progress. It is important to maintain progress in sanctification in the relationship so that stagnation and backsliding are avoided. What Jay E. Adams says of believers and stagnation also applies to marriage relationships. He writes, "A Christian sins if he becomes a static, sedentary person who fears positive biblical change and frantically clings to the past, either in his personality growth, in his life decision, or in his manner of living. To resist sanctifying change is to resist and grieve the Holy Spirit. The scriptural doctrine of sanctification necessarily involves growth in holiness. Christians must change in order to become more like Christ. In principle it is true that believers have been declared perfect in Christ, but now they must grow more like Christ in practice. New truths discovered in the study of the Scriptures must become new practices woven into the fabric of one's daily life."¹⁴ If a couple does not see progress in their relationship week to week, then either they are not doing their homework or one or both parties are refusing to repent. If sanctification is not progressing the couple must seek counsel from a third party to facilitate the rehabilitation process.

(5) The goal of all this hard study, prayer and practice is to develop godly habits in areas which were once dominated by sinful habits. Rehabilitation occurs when the biblical principles of putting off sin and putting on righteousness have been learned and practiced consistently for enough time so that obedience to God's word is second nature. Where at first obedience was a struggle and you constantly had to be on guard armed with appropriate passages, after continual practice you find yourself doing the right thing without even having to think about it. Therefore, even if your marriage has serious problems, if you obey Scripture and develop godly habits you can have joy and peace in your relationship that will not be difficult to maintain.

People who have let serious, long-standing problems erode their marital relationship are analogous to a man who is overweight, very out of shape and unhealthy. When the man first gets serious about his diet and activity the going is difficult. But, after months of faithfulness to his diet and exercise regimen his body becomes strong, fit and conditioned. What was once hard is now relatively easy. He must continue to eat well and exercise to stay healthy, but now he is merely maintaining what he has already achieved. People who have solved problems in their relationship by obeying biblical principles have to maintain what they have achieved and continue to grow spiritually. However, since they have learned to communicate effectively and have developed godly habits

¹⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 77.

maintaining a great relationship is not hard at all. It is a joy. If you are obedient to God's holy Word you will have greater love, intimacy and peace in your marriage relationship. Obedience to Christ and covenant blessings goes hand in hand. May God enable us to obey His Word so that our marriages would be a light to the heathen, our children would grow up to serve Jesus and our relationships would properly reflect that of Christ and His church. Amen.

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[HOME PAGE](#)