

COVENANT KEEPERS

“Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles”

Volume 4 - Issue 3

Summer Edition

How to deal with the differences in your marriage.

Many times couples come to me expressing great concern because of the many struggles they are encountering within their marriages. They wonder why they seem to have so many differences between them. I find that the first thing I must do is to calm their fears by explaining to them several things.

First, I remind them that all married couples will have differences within their marriages simply because of the fact that we are each an individual. We have all grown up in different families under various parenting styles with different spiritual and moral values. Then there are the dramatic differences between men and women physically, emotionally, and hormonally. In addition, our geographical or cultural backgrounds can influence us, thereby forming us into individuals with different likes and dislikes that are not always apparent when we first begin to date. However, these distinctions become very apparent when we live together, interacting within the daily routine of a marriage relationship. Consequently, these many differences are the reason why we struggle so often in our desire to become united in a one flesh relationship.

Now you may be thinking, *With all these differences how can any two people be compatible and live in harmony with someone of the opposite sex?* Is it possible to ever find someone that you are truly compatible with? Is it reasonable to think

that two people could ever become like-minded?

What is compatibility?

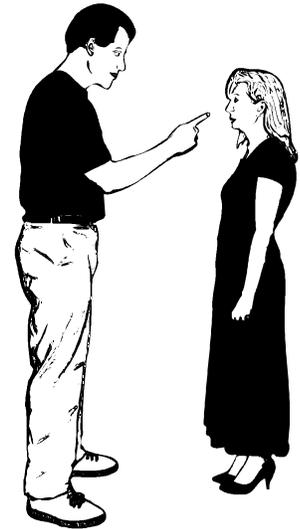
The most common view of compatibility today is that if you have many things in common with your spouse, then you are considered a compatible match and you are expected to get along well with your mate. I used to believe that until I counseled several couples who seemingly had everything in common while their marriages ended in divorce. At the same time I was also counseling several couples whose partners had little in common yet turned their marriages around by reconciling their differences. Through these circumstances I came to realize that my definition of who was truly compatible was wrong.

What is my definition of compatibility today? Compatibility is not measured by how many things you have in common, but is gauged by how you resolve the things that you don't have in common. In other words, the real question is: how willing are you to work at solving your differences? This is what will make you compatible with your mate.

What should you do about your differences?

1. Make a choice. Your choice is the first step to dealing with your differences and where true compatibility begins. So often, the couples that I counsel are simply fighting a battle of wills. I see people sit in the chair with their arms folded across their chest, scowling and declaring by their very body language, *I will not budge from my position.* These individuals then reveal by their words that they

have decided that *their* way is the only way. This is a choice of the heart.



Are you fighting a battle of wills?

The Scripture makes it absolutely clear that the most important things in life boil down to a series of choices. Joshua exhorted, *“choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve”* (Josh. 24:15). Solomon warned his son not to envy an evil man and *“choose none of his ways”* (Prov. 3:31). God also warned His people, *“choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant”* (Is. 56:4). These are all choices we must make regularly if we are to experience God's best in our lives.

Similarly, you must decide whether or not you are willing to choose what pleases God as it relates to the struggles you are having with your spouse. You are either willing to do what God requires of you or you are not. Which is it? You need to decide right now, because unless you are willing

She is your companion and your wife by covenant Mal. 2:14

to fully obey God's Word, knowing the rest of the principles that I am about to discuss will profit you little. Therefore, what will you do? Will you choose what is right and do whatever is biblically required of you? Or, will you decide to continue living your own way and trying to solve your differences by your own strength?

2. Deal with your selfishness. At this point in our discussion I would like you to take a moment and do an exercise with me that I usually have couples do when they come for counseling. Take out a piece of paper and write down all of the major differences you have with your spouse and put them in the order of severity and frequency. Then, write next to each difference how *you* are acting selfishly with regard to that conflict. By doing this exercise you have just identified precisely why this difference has become such an intense point of disagreement in your relationship.

How willing are you to work at solving your differences?

In addition, I tell couples, when they finish this exercise, that they now know exactly what to do about each contentious issue. I usually get a puzzled look at this statement. I explain that all they have to do is adopt the opposite attitude or action and the problem will cease to be a point of contention. This does not mean that the difference evaporates into thin air. It still exists, but the selfishness that intensified it is gone. Remember, the opposite of selfishness is love. Paul said that love "*does not seek its own*" (1 Cor. 13:5).

Therefore, are you willing to look honestly at your own selfishness and make a U turn? This is critical to resolving issues and making real head-

way in finding solutions to the conflicts that divide you.

3. Choose not to condemn. A condemning attitude is another grievous problem I see when couples come to discuss the differences in their marriages. If your heart is resentful and condemning at this moment, this is a sign that you have not followed the previous two points. Why do I say this? Because if you will first examine your own selfishness, an immediate conviction will occur within your heart. This conviction will drive you to cry out to God for His mercy which naturally softens your heart toward your mate.

Notice the context of the teaching Jesus gave in the Sermon on The Mount concerning condemning your brother. He exhorted, "*Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned*" (Luke 6:37). Then four verses later Jesus revealed that self-examination is the key to not condemning your brother. He continues "*And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye*" (v 41-42).

What happens when you condemn your spouse instead of examining your own faults? The differences between you become more pronounced and the separation and loss of intimacy grow. Remember, condemning your mate solves nothing. Dealing with your differences in a biblical manner must be seen as your only option. Why not begin walking down the path to a solution instead of heading in the direction of greater alienation?

4. Ask forgiveness. Once you stop

condemning and despising your partner for not thinking and acting the way you want, you must now choose to seek forgiveness. This forgiveness must occur in two directions. First, ask God to forgive you for your selfish and condemning attitude toward your mate. Why? Because these attitudes are sinful and displeasing to Him. God is willing to forgive you for anything you've done, but you must sincerely ask with a whole-hearted desire to turn from these failures. The apostle John assured us that "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). With this awesome promise before you, won't you ask Him to cleanse you right now and renew your desire for a right relationship with your mate? As you do, the hardness of your heart will continue to melt.

Remember, condemning your mate solves nothing.

Next, you must ask your spouse for his or her forgiveness because your selfishness, resentment, and condemnation have surely offended your mate as well. The best way to handle this is to come to your spouse and begin by first confessing your faults and simply ask for his or her forgiveness. This action will hopefully be the encouragement necessary for your partner to do the same.

5. Look for compromise. The art of compromise is a key to dealing with your differences and to finding true compatibility in any marriage. Love always seeks a compromise because love is always looking for a way to come together and solve problems. But let me make myself absolutely clear on this point. I am not talking about compromising over moral or biblical issues that are clearly re-

vealed in Scripture. These are concerns that cannot be compromised under any circumstance.

The issues that you should find a compromise concerning are those peripheral concerns that really have no spiritual or moral significance. Paul declared that there are things in the Christian life that can be a point of contention but in fact have no spiritual benefit whatsoever. He explained to the Corinthian church that *“food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse”* (1 Cor. 8:8). However, this was a serious point of contention among the believers in this church. Consequently, he encouraged these Christians to find a simple compromise by choosing to lovingly restrain their desires and not take any action that might stumble their brothers and sisters.

Dealing with your differences in a biblical manner must be seen as your only option.

Most of the issues that couples disagree over reside within these peripheral areas. These are the issues you need to find a compromise over. Yet, every week I talk with couples who have explosive arguments over such things as: how to spend the household finances, how to discipline the children, or what the family will do on vacation. I am sure that if you unselfishly purpose to love one another you can find a compromise and agreement in such areas.

6. Talk over the differences. The quickest way to find this compromise is to sit down and talk the problem through. Communication is the most important way for you to give and exchange the reasons for your individual positions. God understood the

importance of reasoning with us over our differences with Him: *“Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord”* (Is. 1:18). To reason with mankind is why He sent His prophets throughout history and why He ultimately sent His Son. God wanted to communicate and reason with you and me so that the infinite differences we possessed could be resolved.

In addition, communication not only enables us to reason with each other, but it is also the key to ultimately gaining understanding. Couples confess to me regularly that they just don't understand what their spouses are thinking or why they are upset. This immediately reveals to me that there is a communication problem in the marriage.

Do you want to understand your mate? If so, then get together with your spouse and patiently, lovingly, and honestly communicate your thoughts and feelings about the differences you possess. If the conversation begins to get heated, stop the discussion for a few minutes to enable both of you to calm down, then resume. Don't give up. Reason with your mate about why you think and feel the way you do. Also, be willing to be “reasoned with” because your spouse has an equally valid viewpoint.

7. Purpose to lovingly give. Love is the most powerful motivation to resolving the differences in your marriage. Love is the reason why you seek a *plan* to resolve your conflicts. Love is also the motivation to carry-out the agreement once you have talked it through. In addition, love is what enables you to forgive when your spouse fails to fulfill the agreement (1 Peter 4:8). Love is the key to all aspects of dealing with your differences.

But most of all, love is what causes you to give when you don't feel like giving. Scripture constantly brings to our attention the example of God's love that gave in the greatest way

possible to resolve His differences with mankind. Remember, *“For God so loved that He gave His only begotten Son”* (John 3:16). Love is what motivated the Father to give up His most precious possession, the Son of His love (Col. 1:13). John then naturally encourages us *“If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (1 John 4:11).

Reason with your mate about why you think and feel the way you do.

Here is the answer you are looking for: a giving motivated by love. This is what makes the differences you possess workable because it causes your spouse to be provoked to give in return. This is why we are commanded to *“provoke unto love and to good works”* (Heb. 10:24 KJV). We know all too well how to provoke one another unto wrath and evil works. Yet, love and giving to your spouse will bridge the chasm between you. Therefore, decide how and where you can be more giving in the areas where you have been stubborn. Take little opportunities throughout the day to determine your mate's needs and give. Purpose in your heart to never be “out given.”

8. Resolve to be respectful. Behaving in a respectful manner in these areas of difference is essential to keeping the peace, which in turn enables you to enjoy long-term success. Scripture gives a reciprocal command to husbands and wives that encourages this action. *“Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband”* (Eph. 5:33). Notice the coupling of the command to love and respect. How important these two attitudes and actions are because one naturally will beget the other. Even though respect is a command given

specifically to wives, this by no means exempts the husband being respectful anymore than it allows the wife to be unloving. Loving respect is the glue that holds a marriage together even when there are grave differences between the partners.

Don't give up!

How can you show respect for one another? Respect is fundamentally an attitude of consideration and care that you demonstrate to your spouse in all that you say and do. It is demonstrated by observing all of the points I have addressed in this article. You respect your loved one by not acting selfishly or forcing your will upon your mate. You come with love in your voice to talk over your differences and attempt to find a mutually agreed-upon solution. There will be no harsh condemnation or belittling of your partner, but a willingness to admit your own faults and seek forgiveness. When two people have this definition of respect there is nothing that they can't resolve.

9. Learn to accept. Acceptance is truly the crowning decision of the mature believer regarding the differences with one's spouse. What do I mean by acceptance?

Acceptance means that you acknowledge the fact that you have these differences because you are two different people. You must also conclude that it is unrealistic to think that you will ever become exactly alike. This simply will not happen! However, as long as you are hoping for such an experience or hoping to change your mate you will always be dissatisfied. You may be thinking, *I don't expect my spouse to become just like me.* Then why do you criticize your partner, or suggest exactly *how* he or she should do something? Your words reveal what you *truly* think and expect.

Acceptance doesn't mean that you stop trying to resolve issues or that you allow your partner to treat you in an unloving way. Acceptance of your differences is simply the fruit of the Spirit demonstrated toward one another. You will become patient and kind to each other while you bear with the differences that exist. You will be gentle and daily seek a greater self-control over your own wants and desires while at the same time attempting to faithfully give to your loved one (Gal. 5:22,23). These are truly the only ways to deal with your differences effectively which will produce the depth of relationship you long for with your spouse.

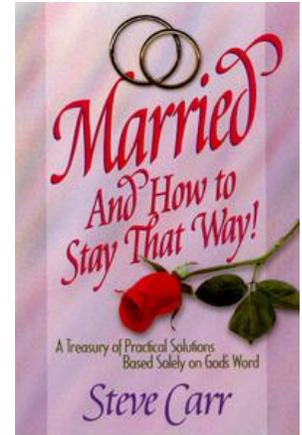
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