

COVENANT KEEPERS

“Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles”

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How can you develop greater compatibility with your spouse?

People often misunderstand the subject of spousal compatibility. I've come to this conclusion for several reasons. First, because couples make statements to me such as: "All we do is fight. This proves that we are not compatible...We don't even like the same things. I don't understand what motivated me to marry this person." Sometimes one partner will end by saying, "I think I married the wrong person."

Do you feel this way about your mate? Has the thought run through your mind that incompatibility has driven a wedge between you and your spouse and the time has come to search for someone new? Do you believe that you married the wrong person?



Find a loving agreement!

My observation

For nearly 30 years I have spoken with couples having various problems. I've counseled individuals who have scored extremely high on premarital tests that measure compatibility, but divorced in a relatively short period of time. I have also observed couples who seemingly held very little in common yet enjoyed fantastic marriages. This puzzled me for years. The reality of this seemingly obvious contradiction drove me to re-

think my definition of compatibility. Today I believe compatibility must be determined not by how many things a couple has in common, but how they resolve the things they don't have in common. In other words, differences do not dictate incompatibility any more than a high score on a standardized test ensures compatibility. The real test of compatibility culminates in this question: Are you willing to work through your differences in order to develop the compatibility you desire?

How can you develop compatibility?

1. The big picture. The first thing you need to do is to step back from your relationship and see the big picture. Many times couples battle over their differences because they can't distinguish the forest from the trees. Unfortunately, the few diseased trees in front of them often overshadow the rest of a healthy forest. Make sure that your view of your relationship includes the whole picture. Quite often couples tell me that they believe they have nothing in common and lack companionship, when in reality they share much common ground. At this point in counseling I usually give couples a companionship worksheet (found on page 29 of my book entitled *Married And How To Stay That Way*) to help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship. Many of them are surprised at the areas that they do have in common. I also explain that it is very possible to develop greater commonality, companionship, and compatibility, if a couple is willing to do some hard work.

General Similarities

An accurate view of this big picture begins with the understanding that Scripture reveals important similarities between you and your mate. James taught that we all have a similar nature with its weaknesses and frailties (James 5:17). We all have common temptations and struggles (1 Cor. 10:13). As sinners, we all have a similar need before God (Rom. 3:23). In addition, each of us must

be forgiven and saved the same way by placing our faith in Christ (Rom. 3:22). Each of us has "*obtained like precious faith*" to draw us to God (2 Peter 1:1). Most importantly, by the grace of God, we can all become like-minded with one another if we will yield to the power of His Spirit (Rom. 15:5) (Rom. 5:5). Now you may be thinking, *But if we are so similar to one another why do we struggle so often?* The answer is, because we are also very different from each other.

General Differences

Think for a moment about these differences. Physically men and women are obviously created very different from one another. However, God did not do this to create conflict, but only that we might be a compliment to each other. Men and women have different hormones flowing through their veins to aid in these physical differences and functions. In addition, we all have come from different families with different personalities, different likes and dislikes, and different goals in life.

Yet these differences do not have to create conflicts. It is only when a couple focuses on these differences, allowing selfishness and stubborn pride to reign, that conflicts occur (Prov. 28:25). The Pharisee and the tax collector show us how a prideful heart focuses only on differences. You may remember: The Pharisee prayed, "*God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector*" (Luke 18:11). Notice that the pride of the Pharisee focused on the superficial differences rather than on the similar need for God.

Focus on the big picture, which always includes your similar needs, and your heart will be kept from the pride and arrogance that magnify your differences.

2. Develop your spiritual life. Developing compatibility with your mate requires a unifying power that is beyond any of our natural strengths or common goals. This unifying influence is the power of God's love to unite two hearts. However, the greatest stumbling block to

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

possessing His powerful love is the choice many couples make to not walk close to the Lord. This independence from God naturally cuts a person off from the direct benefit of His love and power. Are you convinced that only the love of Christ can enable you to give unselfishly? If you choose to not walk in the Spirit and not to allow Christ to control you, then you can be assured that you have only one alternative. That is to be ruled by your fleshly nature. I will guarantee you that this will not yield the outcome you desire.

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Another aspect to this spiritual struggle is when one spouse has a sincere walk with Christ and the other partner does not. This creates a division similar to that, which occurred among the twelve spies who went into the Promised Land. Ten spies saw their circumstances totally different from the other two, Joshua and Caleb. Why? Scripture is clear about the reason for this division. God declared that Caleb had, “*a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully*” (Num. 14:24). This difference automatically caused Caleb, who was a man of faith, to see things very differently from the other spies. His commitment to God and His Word caused the difference and division between them. However, Caleb had complete unity and harmony with Joshua, because they both had the unifying influence of similar faith and willingness to follow the Lord at any cost (Num. 14:6, 30).

Similarly, in the New Testament Paul explains how the unifying power of the Spirit could solve the contentions in the Philippian church. “*Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind*” (Phil. 2:1-2). Notice that Paul reminded them that it was the fellowship of the Spirit that would create the like-mindedness and bring them into one accord.

Therefore, if you desire to develop greater compatibility and like-mindedness with your spouse, begin by sincerely turning to Christ. Ask Him to forgive you for your hardness of heart and to fill you with His love. Bow in prayer with your spouse and ask God to unite your hearts again with a willingness to work out your differences. Like-mindedness begins here. Remember: It’s easy to love those who love you. Anyone can do that. However, true love requires allowing Christ to perfect, mature, and empower you to love those who are hard to love, even your enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). It is possible to love your spouse even if he or she is your enemy at this moment. As you do, God will provoke your mate to do the same (Heb. 10:24). Therefore, knowing these things, why not allow Him to begin His renewing work in your heart right now?

3. Resolve past conflicts. Unresolved conflicts drain compatibility and friendship from marriage. When a couple allows conflicts to remain, it slowly drives them apart and keeps them from experiencing the sweetness of fellowship with one another. When they speak to one another they only spew out bitterness and resentment. Is this the way you communicate with your mate? If you do, you must see your heart like a fountain that is either bringing forth bitter or sweet water. You can’t drink the sweet waters of loving fellowship when you are holding bitterness and resentment over past issues. Bitterness and love cannot proceed from the same heart. James asked a simple question. “*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening*” (James 3:11)? The answer is no.

Therefore, reconciliation over past issues will be essential to allowing intimacy, fellowship, and the sense of compatibility to return to your relationship. Remember, Jesus said the fruit of reconciliation was to have “*gained your brother*” again (Matt. 18:15). Therefore, if you desire to gain your mate again, resolve your outstanding conflicts. How can you do it?

Usually, the first thing I do with couples who come for counseling is ask them for a list of all their unresolved conflicts. I ask each to list these issues in the order of severity. This exercise allows me to gain a clear picture of exactly what is dividing this couple. Then I ask them to

list their personal faults and failures in relation to each unresolved conflict. Jesus instructed His disciples that this was the first step to seeing any conflict clearly. He said, “*First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*” (Matt. 7:5). Once a couple finishes giving me their faults, I then ask them to turn and confess their personal faults to one another and ask forgiveness (James 5:16) (Mark 11:25-26). Honest and sincere confession usually breaks down most of the major walls between them and brings a flood of tears and hugs.

If you need reconciliation over past unresolved issues, won’t you begin by making your own list today? Then go and acknowledge your faults to your mate. Look your spouse directly in the eyes and sincerely ask your loved one to forgive you. Once you’ve taken these steps, you have cleared one of your greatest roadblocks to developing greater compatibility. Why not start clearing the ground today!

4. Seek understanding. Once you’ve reconciled these past issues, now you are ready to lay the foundation for growth in compatibility. To begin this work you need a greater understanding of your mate in your areas of difference. Understanding is what keeps you from failing in the same area over and over again. What is required to gain understanding of your mate?

It is possible to love your spouse even if he or she is your enemy.

The first thing to do is to sit down and talk over the most recent issue that has destroyed your sense of compatibility. Ask your mate if he or she has any suggestions about how to keep this conflict from recurring. This action would demonstrate your obedience to a simple command of Scripture. Husbands should dwell with their wives “*with understanding*” (1 Peter 3:7). The word *understanding* in this passage means to gain knowledge by investigation. Therefore, investigating your mate’s thoughts and goals will always be the first step in understanding any behavior or conflict. The more time you spend simply inquiring and searching out what

your mate thinks and desires on any given subject, the greater will be your understanding. Greater understanding of your loved one will always produce a greater sense of compatibility in your relationship.

To further enhance your understanding you must also become a good listener. Solomon explained to his son this key to understanding. *“Pay attention to my wisdom; lend your ear to my understanding”* (Prov. 5:1). If you want to develop understanding of your mate, you must develop good listening skills. However, most of us are more ready to talk than we are to listen. If this is your problem, you are doomed to hear these words over and over again from your spouse: “I’ve told you this several times before. Haven’t you been listening?” If you don’t want to hear these words, then be swift to hear and slow to speak (James 1:19).

Bitterness and love cannot proceed from the same heart.

Another key ingredient in gaining understanding is your ability to remember what your spouse has explained or asked you to do. It usually sounds like this: “Honey, if you would just do _____,” or, “If you would only stop doing _____ I wouldn’t get so upset.” So often husbands and wives try and explain to their mate what would make the relationship better, but it is simply not heard, or it is forgotten. If your knowledge of what should or should not be done is to be applied to future behavior, you must remember what your mate has said. Jesus reproved his disciples for failing to learn the lesson from a miracle that he had just performed. He asked them, *“Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up”* (Matt. 16:9)? Jesus knew that the disciples were confused about what He was teaching them. Note that Jesus directly associates their lack of understanding with their failure to remember.

Therefore, begin investigating what your spouse thinks and believes is important. Listen carefully, and remember what he or she has said. Then act on your insights. If your mate has told you, “I

love it when you _____,” don’t wait another day, do it! As you demonstrate your understanding by your actions, you will also sense a greater compatibility and harmony in your relationship.

5. Agree to compromise. A further aid to developing compatibility will be finding mutually agreeable compromises. However, let me clarify what I mean by compromise. I am not talking about compromise over moral issues or direct biblical commands. These issues should never be compromised under any circumstances. However, there are a multitude of issues that do not fall into this category, issues which may allow you to find workable compromises that will greatly affect your relationship. Let me give an example.

Paul gave excellent counsel to the couples in the Corinthian church concerning decisions about when or if they should abstain from sexual relations with their spouse. He declared, *“Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control”* (1 Cor. 7:5). The word *consent* in this passage means to find a harmonious agreement. Note that an agreement between both partners was essential. Please notice that neither the husband nor the wife had the right to dictate to the other concerning the frequency of their sexual relationship. Paul explained that both partners had given up the right to refuse their bodies since they were joined in marriage. If a refusal for sexual relations is verbalized it must be by mutual consent and agreement.

Judging from the amount of marriage counseling that I do on this subject, many couples have confided in me that they are not very compatible in their sexual relationship. Some believe they are being deprived while others believe they are being forced to perform. Compatibility in the sexual area or any area is simply a question of finding an agreement to lovingly compromise. Love will cause one partner to restrain his or her desires for sexual relations. However, love will also cause the other partner to initiate and give more frequently. It’s simply a matter of choosing to love! Love will always motivate you to find a compromise in this, or any area of your marriage. You can do it!

Therefore, whether your differences are in your sexual relationship or some other issue, you must begin a dialog with your mate and pursue agreement through compromise. When you come up with a reasonable idea for compromise, sit down with your mate and discuss it. If there is still a disagreement, continue in prayer and discussion until you find a compromise. Remember: If Paul commanded couples to find an agreement in the most intimate area of sex, don’t you think it could also work in other areas? Why not begin your search for that loving agreement to compromise in those recurring areas of conflict?

6. Stop pleasing yourself. Several of the apostles made it very clear that when self-seeking exists in a person’s heart, every evil work will result. In other words, when there is a problem in a relationship, selfishness is usually the cause. James warned that where *“envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there”* (James 3:16).

So often husbands and wives try and explain to their mate what would make the relationship better, but it is simply not heard, or it is forgotten.

Paul also associated selfish ambition with the disharmony within the Philippian Church. He encouraged them to *“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). Paul revealed here both the cause of their strife and the simple solution. Humility and consideration for others would solve the strife.

Similarly, if you desire greater harmony and compatibility within your marriage, then you must determine where you are living selfishly and turn away from these behaviors.

Let me give you a simple exercise to help. As soon as you finish reading this publication, make a list of all the areas in

which you experience the greatest disharmony with your mate. Next to each item, determine how you are acting or reacting in a selfish manner by your attitudes, words, or behavior. Now list an alternative action that would demonstrate love, humility, and self-sacrifice. Last, go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him for the grace you need and the power of His Spirit to implement these changes. His grace and power are sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9).

7. Be realistic. Growth in compatibility also requires a continual dose of realism. Remember: Unrealistic expectations concerning your marriage partner will always result in unfulfilled expectations, which naturally lead to frustration and anger because your spouse is not doing what you think he or she should. Therefore, how can you be more realistic?

First, you must remember that your mate will never be exactly like you. The way you perceive people, places, and things will always be filtered through two different personalities and perceptions. Therefore, give your spouse the right to have his or her own ideas and opinions. Your mate does not have to always look at things the same way you do.

When it comes to changes in behavior, remember that your mate will never do what you've asked perfectly every time. No human being can be *that* consistent! Being realistic means that you know you are married to an imperfect person who will fail and fall short of the mark (Rom. 3:23). Understanding this truth should give you a heart of patience and forgiveness. The apostle John acknowledged that even he needed the forgiveness of Jesus, our mighty Advocate. *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"* (1 John 2:1). He uses the word *we* to describe our common need for, and access to, the grace of the Righteous One.

Jesus also acknowledged His realism when he told the disciples that they were, *"foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe"* (Luke 24:25). His statement reveals a very important truth. Realistically Jesus understood that as sinners we are slow at heart to believe. In fact, we are slow at heart to do anything.

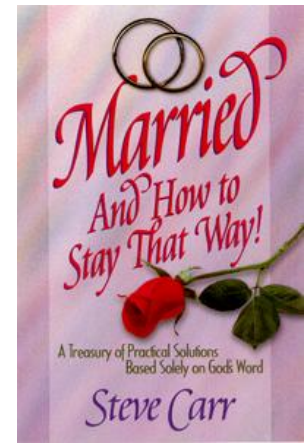
Therefore, be realistic! Your spouse in not going to change overnight. The

biblical principle that you should base your expectations upon is what I call the *More and More* principle. Paul explained this truth when he exhorted the Thessalonians concerning love. *"But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more"* (1 Thess. 4:9-10). A realistic expectation for your mate or for yourself, is that God will work more and more to transform you day by day. Understanding this truth will result in tolerance and realism.

Therefore beloved, knowing these things, won't you attempt to understand instead of condemn your spouse? Give your loved one the patience and grace you desire to receive. Decide to love unselfishly. Seek positions of agreement where you can compromise with one another instead of digging in your heels. Grow in your relationship with Christ so that you might experience His power and strength to put these principles into practice. As you do, you will enjoy the compatibility God intends for your marriage more and more each day.

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