

COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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The Most Important Key to Improving Your Marriage.

When couples first come to me for relationship counseling, and their marriage is not in a good place, one of the first questions they ask me is, "Where do we begin in order to turn our marriage around?" The answer is quite simple, but the implementation is not easy. What's the answer? I tell couples, "You first need to both begin developing and deepening your spiritual relationship with God." This is the most important key, and the first step in changing your relationship with each other.

Why is your personal spiritual life the key to changing your marriage?

1. Every marital problem is first a spiritual problem. This fact is what I have concluded after more than 50 years of marriage counseling. Consider this one proof that this principle is valid. Where did all of mankind's problems begin? Didn't all of our problems begin in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve decided they would disobey God? The first thing they did after the fall was to blame each other, and then Satan for all their problems. What happened next? Envy, resentment, and murder sprang up in their children. All their family and marriage problems are a result of this one decision to live independently and disobey God. This is why I say, every marital problem is first a spiritual problem, because all of our interpersonal and relational conflicts result from living independently from God.

When I ask the couples who come in for counseling about their personal

relationship with God, I have found over and over again that there is little or sporadic time given to developing their relationship with Him. People tell me that they rarely spend daily time reading the Bible or in personal prayer. They usually don't share spiritual things with one another or pray together. Going to church together is also sporadic. Consequently, this is a prescription for disaster!



Take the time to improve your marriage!

If you want to transform your marriage, then you both must first return to an intimate love relationship with the Lord. He is the only One who can fill you with the love you need to renew your relationship with your spouse. If you sense something is not right in your marriage, don't look at your mate, first look at your own heart and your own walk with Christ. Jesus 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). If you ask Him to remove your plank, He will do it! It is only then that you will see clearly how to renew your relationship.

2. The natural result of drawing closer to Christ. The natural result of drawing closer to Christ, is that you will draw closer to one another. The intimacy of your love relationship with Christ will of necessity overflow into your marriage because you are filled with the Holy Spirit. "The fruit of the

Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Aren't these the qualities necessary for the marriage you long for? Being under the control of His Spirit is the only means to attain the fruit of the Spirit, which is love. God's love inside of you will make you kind, unselfish, and patient. His Spirit empowers the self-control you need to control your tongue, and to be faithful to your commitments. As you seek the power of His Spirit and His rule over your life, you will come into an intimacy and oneness with God, which naturally results in oneness with your spouse.

3. The fruit of the Spirit is the only power greater than your flesh. When you consider the works of the flesh as described in Scripture, you realize that these are the attitudes and behaviors that divide husbands and wives. Paul said, "The works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21). It is obvious that if you are contentious, selfish, envious, getting drunk or using drugs, or are sexually unfaithful, you are not going to get along very well with your mate. But, if you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you will not fulfill the desires of your flesh. This is the promise of God's Word: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). How can this promise be true? Because when the Holy Spirit lives and rules inside of you, He can subdue the most powerful works of your flesh. This is why you must have a closer walk with Christ, to allow Him to be Lord of your

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

life. When the Spirit rules you, freedom results. To experience the empowering of the Spirit, all you must do is ask the Father. Jesus said, *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him"* (Luke 11:13)!

4. But, what about those who do pursue the Lord in the Word, in prayer, and attend church regularly?

This is a great question. I have found those who do spend time in prayer, study the Scriptures, and even regularly attend church, but their marriage is terrible. Is this an exception? No, because it is necessary, even vital, to *apply* the Word of God to our personal lives. A personal relationship with Christ is built on two important things, *hearing* and *doing* the things God commands you. We are called to not only be hearers of the Word but also doers. James declared, *"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* (James 1:22). Many couples know exactly what to do, because they have heard the truth over and over again in church every week. However, they choose *not to apply* what they hear because of unbelief, unwillingness, pride, resentment, selfishness, or some other work of the flesh. These sinful hindrances frustrate their marriage and the blessing God wants to give.

How can you change your spiritual life with God?

1. Remember and repent. It is vital that you remember what it was like when your relationship with God was very good. Do you remember the joy and the peace of God that you experienced when you surrendered your life to Him? This is where you must begin. Jesus told the church of Ephesus, *"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where*

you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent" (Rev. 2:2-5).

It is important to note that Jesus knew that this church had left their love relationship with Him, and it was offensive to Him. This is why He commanded them to repent, which means to turn around and go in the opposite direction. Remembering from where you have fallen is the motivation you need to return to Him. So, turn around, and run back into the arms of Christ who is waiting for you right now! Just as the father was waiting for the prodigal son, so He is waiting for you! Turn to Him now; you won't regret it.

2. What if you have never had a thriving relationship with God? Just start where you are today. Don't look back and allow guilt to overwhelm you, or try to clean up your life in your own strength. You can't change your sinful behaviors on your own. You can't change yourself! God is the only One who can transform and change your life. Only He has the power to do this work, and He has promised to do it. All God requires is that you surrender yourself into His hands. Paul declared in Romans, *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"* (Rom. 12:1-2). God wants you to simply present yourself before Him, and the transformation process will begin. But this can't be a one-day decision. You must continue to surrender yourself to Him, which continues the transformation process. When Paul spoke to the Thessalonian church about God's sanctifying work, He assured them, *"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it"* (1 Thess. 5:24). Your only option then is to completely give your life up into His hands, and watch what will happen! He will do it!

3. Humble yourself before God. Humility is so important to this process of renewing your relationship with

God. Why? Because humility is what brings you to the place where you *want* to surrender your life to God. James declared this important truth twice in his short epistle. He said, *"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* (James 4:6). Do you need the grace of God to change? Absolutely!

Then again in a few short verses, James commands his readers to, *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up"* (James 4:10). Isn't this exactly what you want? You need God to lift you up, and to give you the grace you need to change your attitudes and behaviors.

Humility is simply you being honest with yourself about your need. When you see the lack of love in your heart toward your spouse, the unwillingness to give, or your intense resentment or selfishness, these things should reveal your personal need. Humility will bring you to the feet of Jesus for help.

4. Acknowledge your faults to God and ask His forgiveness. Humility will also bring you to a place of acknowledging your faults to God and asking for His forgiveness. Pride causes you to think just the opposite about yourself. If you are thinking, *I can handle these problems in my marriage, I don't need God*, this is pride! But the reality is, if you could have handled these issues on your own, why haven't you before now? Why have your marital problems just gotten worse? The answer is simple; you need God's help and His power.

Remember, don't look at your mate's faults, first consider your own. Allow the Spirit of God to bring sincere and honest self-reflection. Once you see your faults before God, all you must do is ask for His forgiveness. Experiencing God's forgiveness gets your heart right before Him. He is ready and willing to forgive any and all of your sins. David said of God, *"For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You"* (Ps 86:5). The word *ready* in this verse means that God is quick or in a hurry to forgive. Forgiving is the only thing in all of Scripture that He declares He is in a hurry to do. The word *abundant* refers to the multiplication of God's mercy by tens of thousands of times, over and

over again. What a promise this is! What mercy this is! Take God at His Word, and ask Him for His mercy and forgiveness.

5. Now go and acknowledge your faults to your spouse and ask his or her forgiveness. Taking this action is the first step in restoring your relationship with your mate. This is equally as important as acknowledging your faults to God. Why? Because if you don't have a right relationship with your spouse, you do not have a right relationship with God. This is why Jesus commanded believers to first reconcile with whom they were in conflict, before they sought fellowship with Him. Jesus said it this way, *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift"* (Matt. 5:23-24). In other words, Jesus is saying, "First get your relationship right with your brother, and then come see Me."

James also commanded believers to, *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16). Once you have confessed your faults to your mate, ask your spouse to pray with you to renew your relationship with God, and seek His healing for your marriage.

Getting your relationship right with your spouse, and keeping it right, is one of the most important truths to understand for your marriage. You must realize that your love relationship with your spouse is a reflection of the depth of your love relationship with God. This understanding should also bring true humility in your heart. The Apostle John wrote, *"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also"* (1 John 4:20-21). John draws a simple equation in these verses. If you truly have a love relationship with God, you *must* love your brother

also. Your brother obviously can refer also to your spouse.

Why is acknowledging your faults so vital to renewing your relationship with God and your spouse? Confessing your faults to your mate proves that you are sincere and honest before God. It is also proof of your sincerity with your mate. Both God and your spouse know the reality of what has gone on in your marriage, so when you speak the truth in this manner, both will know that your repentance is real.

6. Determine exactly what you need to do to change. How can you know specifically what needs to change in your relationship with God, and with your spouse? Make a list of all the things you have already confessed to God and to your mate. This helps you to see things clearly and enables change in your future actions. Then begin to ask God for the power of His Spirit to help you make those necessary changes. The simplest actions to take would be to just do the exact opposite of your list of faults. This is the meaning of repentance. The word *repent* means to turn around and go in the opposite direction. Real repentance results from first changing the way you think in your mind about your sin. Instead of excuses and self-justification, you will think only of how your behaviors have offended God and your spouse. True repentance concerning your attitudes and actions will change everything in your life and marriage. Peter told the early believers, *"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord"* (Acts 3:19). These times of refreshing are waiting for you!

7. Return to praying and reading your Bible on a daily basis. Becoming a man or a woman of prayer, and planting the Word of God deep inside you, are how you keep your heart and mind in the right place. The Psalmist declared *"LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You"* (Ps. 88:9). Do you stretch out your hands to God in prayer every day? I hope that you pray multiple times throughout your day! This is how you can experience a

refreshing touch from God's Spirit whenever the need arises.

Luke also explained that a daily time in God's Word was also essential for following the Lord. He wrote concerning the people of Berea that, *"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so"* (Acts 17:11). The word *fair-minded* means to be more open-minded to the things of God, due to a noble character. The more godly your character is, the greater will be your hunger for God's truth and knowledge. Therefore, set time aside every day, so you can hear what God wants to speak to your heart. Prayer enables you to talk to God, and reading your Bible is how you allow God to speak to you. Don't miss this blessing!

Let me warn you at this point. If you fail to pursue the instruction and power of God on a daily basis, I can promise you that all of your bad attitudes and habits will return. The Bible teaches that man's heart is prone to wander away from God. Why? Because your heart is prone to love other things more than God (Jer. 14:10). Without seeking the Lord with your whole heart, you will surely wander back to your old ways. This is why David prayed, *"With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments"* (Ps. 119:10)!

8. Get back to church. Another very important principle that will greatly help you get your life right and keep yourself on track is regular church attendance. God ordained the church to strengthen and to build you up in your faith. The church is the primary means to teach you the Word of God and where you learn to apply His truth in your life. God wants to reveal His truth to your heart. Your pastor should possess the gift of teaching that will bring about this fruit of understanding. Paul declared to Titus, *"Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began,*

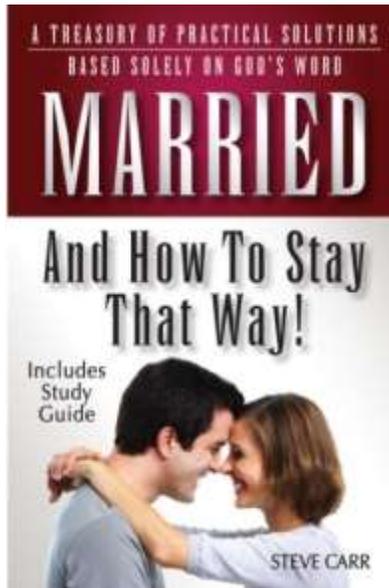
but has in due time manifested His word through preaching, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior” (Titus 1:1-3). The word *manifested* in this passage means to make known or reveal the truth of God. As you listen to anointed preaching you should have a revelation of what the Word of God means, and how it should apply to your life. This is also why the apostle warned believers to not make a habit of, “forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25). When you forsake assembling with other believers at church, you are literally forsaking the help and the encouragement you need in your own Christian life and marriage. Two strong believers will always equal one strong marriage!

9. Just as you have received, now give to your spouse. Once you are daily receiving from the Lord, only then will you be able to give to your spouse and family the love, grace, and mercy they need. Remember the parable of the wicked servant who would not forgive others as he had been forgiven? What did Jesus tell him? “*Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you*” (Matt. 18:33)? If you want to renew your relationship with God and your mate, you must remember this equation. “*Just as*” God has shown mercy and forgiven you, helped you, loved you, and given to you, do the same to your spouse. As you do, your marriage will grow and be blessed!

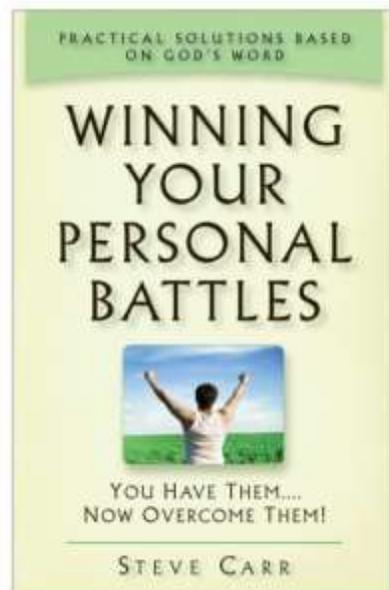
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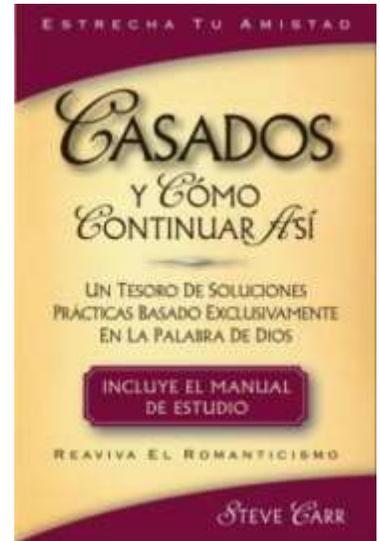
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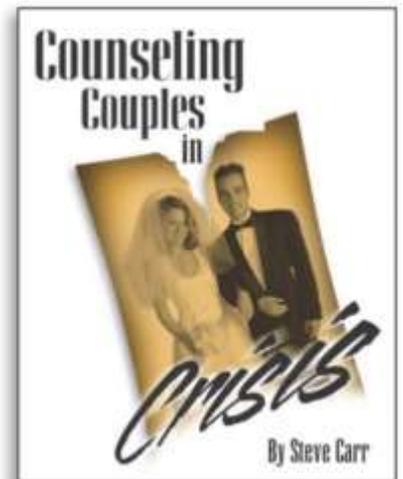
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