

COVENANT KEEPERS

“Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles”

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Finding the root of your marital problems.

Have you ever wondered what causes the conflicts in your marriage? Is there one basic reason why you and your spouse seem to continually battle with each other? If you have considered these questions, you are on the right track because you are searching for the root of your problems. If you have never asked yourself these questions, won't you stop and consider them right now?

Is there a root cause to the disagreements and strife between you? Think for a moment about the one thing that Scripture requires of us in order to reconcile our conflict with God and follow Him. Jesus put His finger squarely on our greatest need: *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it”* (Matt. 16:24,25). Jesus made it clear that the disciples could not continue to live for themselves and follow Him at the same time. Self had to be denied to the point of death. These men were called to go to the cross in their personal lives for the sake of the One who called them. Jesus knew that self had to be dethroned if He was ever to be enthroned as Lord of their lives.

The self-life is what keeps any person at war with God and living an independent life. If you want to follow Christ, living for self will be impossible. Paul addressed this issue with the Corinthians as one of the root

causes of their many conflicts with each other. He encouraged that since Christ had *“died for all...those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again”* (2 Cor. 5:15). He explained that living for self is directly opposed to living for Christ. Therefore, selfishness is the primary issue that God desires to deal with in every life. Only as you renounce selfish living can you begin to live for Him and be able to truly serve others.



Selfishness destroys!

The Apostle James also wrote to the church explaining why the Christians in his day were having so much strife. He declared, *“where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there”* (James 3:16). The word *confusion* means “a state of instability and disorder.” Self-seeking is what causes this instability and disorder in all relationships. Envy is equally self-oriented because it is only concerned with getting for itself what another has. Every con-

flict you have and every evil thing begins with a concentration on self. If you want to deal with the root cause of the conflicts in your relationship, here it is: selfishness.

Why is selfishness such a root issue?

First of all, self-seeking is completely contrary to love. Paul taught the Corinthian church this vital truth when he explained that *“love does not seek its own”* (1 Cor. 13:5). Scripture makes it clear that love is always more concerned about others' well-being. Paul had already made this clear to the Corinthians when he commanded them: *“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being”* (1 Cor. 10:24). Therefore, love and selfishness cannot co-exist. They are like oil and water that can never mix. Always remember this fundamental truth: the degree to which you love others equals that of the denial of self.

What does selfishness look like in a marriage?

Selfishness has many faces, all of which are ugly. Sometimes self is seen in a very bold and aggressive way when a person will verbally insist on having his or her own way. It's his way or it's no way. It's the straightforward demand of *me* first. Sometimes this bold demand is accompanied with a violent outburst of anger to insure its way is obtained through intimidation.

Other times selfishness is very subtle. It can have the quiet face of cunning manipulation with gentle words. But

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

in reality, it is still just a persistent pressure to work it's own will upon you. It also may be seen as that stubborn resistance to bend or compromise over even the smallest issues. When its will is not acknowledged or yielded to, there is a quiet sulking or an attitude of indifference until the other partner finally surrenders.

Whether selfishness is seen in its bold or subtle forms, it is the root of the problems between you. Beloved, be not deceived. When you allow self-righteousness, self-will, self-justification, or self-indulgence to reign in your heart, it can only bring every evil thing to your relationship. Only by laying the ax to the root of this tree will you ever see the fruit you desire in your life and marriage.

Where are you living selfishly?

Before you can ever begin to deal with any of the problems in your marriage, you must first identify exactly where *you* are living selfishly. Jesus said, "*First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye*" (Matt. 7:5). Because of this command, I often start here in marriage counseling because I know this is the root of the problem. I usually ask a couple to begin by making a list for me of every place in which each one is living selfishly. The plank needs to be removed from each eye before either can clearly see the real need in their marriage. I can not stress to you enough how important it is for you to first look in the mirror before you ever take a magnifying glass to your mate.

Let me speak very frankly with you. Unless you are willing to do this exercise, you can forget about solving the problems in your marriage. If you really want to get to the root of your marital problems, here is what you need to do: Find a piece of paper and get off by yourself. Ask God to show you the plank in your own eye.

Begin by making a list of every area where you are living selfishly in your marriage relationship. Be specific. Is your thinking centered on yourself or on your mate's well-being? Do your conversations begin and end with your views and opinions? Where are you failing to lay your life down and give to your spouse? But, a word of warning. Be careful that you don't begin listing your mate's faults, only your own. As you look at your list, you will see clearly what is causing the conflicts in your marriage.

How can you overcome selfishness in your relationship?

1. Choose to look honestly at your thoughts and motives. This first step is very important because selfishness begins in the thoughts and motives of your heart. Before selfishness ever becomes an action in your life, it will surface in the way you think about yourself and your spouse. Therefore, you must first detect selfishness in your heart and mind before you will be able to control it in your behavior. This is why Jesus said to the scribes, "*Why do you think evil in your hearts?*" (Matt. 9:4). Jesus knew their hearts were wrong, and so He encouraged them to examine their own thinking so that they might see the error within. This is also why you must probe your own thought life. Close scrutiny will enable you to see if the motives of your heart are selfish or not.

You examine yourself by simply focusing your attention on what you are thinking. How do you perceive yourself in relation to your partner? Do you think you are better, smarter, or wiser than your spouse? These thoughts reveal selfish and arrogant thinking that will result in actions that will cause conflict and little relationship. Remember, "*If anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself*" (Gal. 6:3). Don't deceive yourself. Rather,

be honest and think seriously about yourself. You are nothing apart from Christ and His transforming grace. Think this way because it is the truth. These thoughts will become the basis and motivation for new behavior.

2. Ask for revelation and conviction. Only when you begin to pray for the conviction of the Spirit in your own life will the changes begin. His conviction is the powerful motivation you need to make this dramatic turnaround. Do you remember His conviction and how it turned your life around to follow Christ in the beginning? The Holy Spirit has come to "*convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment*" (John 16:8). He is the best one to show you what is wrong, what is right, and what the consequences will be if you fail to respond.

If you want to follow Christ, living for self will be impossible.

However, when I speak of conviction, don't mistake it for condemnation. God's conviction is the sweet and gentle prodding of the Lord that draws you to Him and causes you to willingly surrender to His way of love. Be sure you know the difference between conviction and condemnation. One is life-giving, the other is deadly. Therefore, ask God to reveal every place where self reigns in your life. Then go back and add each of these items to your list. Finally, ask the Holy Spirit to convict you daily that you might have the inward motivation to change. Ask Him to give you no rest until Christ controls these attitudes, motives, and actions.

3. Choose to deny yourself and surrender to the Lord. Once you have determined where you are living selfishly and you are convicted about it, you now have a choice to make. Will

you choose to deny your selfish desires or choose to deny the conviction? It's one thing to know you shouldn't do something; it's quite another to respond to the conviction and stop doing it. It's really just a choice you make.

Throughout Scripture, man's choice is identified as what has determined whether he will experience God's power to change or not. Joshua encouraged the children of Israel, "*choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve*" (Joshua 24:15). God pleaded with His people through the Prophet Isaiah, "*choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant*" (Is. 56:4). Moses also warned the Jews, "*I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life*" (Deut. 30:19).

Love and selfishness cannot co-exist.

Choosing to deny your selfish thoughts and motives is up to you. No one can do this for you; it's your decision. Everyday you are presented with a multitude of choices to make. Will you choose to serve Christ or not? Will you choose what pleases Him or what pleases you? Will you choose to serve yourself first or your spouse?

Therefore, make the choice today over each issue you listed on your paper. Choose to yield to the conviction of the Spirit and deny yourself. When you do, you'll finally experience peace. Choose to yield to Christ and ask Him to *empower* you by His Spirit to live unselfishly.

Surrendering to Christ and His Holy Spirit is where you obtain the power to follow through on your choice to turn from selfish behavior. When you fully give yourself to Christ, He comes to take control and transforms your innermost being. He is the One who will give you the new thoughts

and desires that are needed for change. He's waiting for you to come to Him so that He might show you that He is stronger than your selfish nature. His Holy Spirit will transform you into the image of Jesus Christ if you will just ask (2 Cor. 3:18). If you would only seek His power today, you would surely find His promise is true. 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). Have you been asking? Without His power you will be battling your selfishness in your own strength and this will only guarantee failure.

Paul also emphasized the need of the Holy Spirit who would enable victory over our fleshly nature. He said, "*If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*" (Rom. 8:13). Notice that Paul acknowledges that you have a choice in this matter of the fleshly deeds of the body. You must decide if you will live according to your flesh or put it to death. You must by the power of the Spirit deny the deeds of the flesh and trust that by His enabling grace you will live. His life in you will always empower you to serve others before yourself.

4. Confess your selfishness. Once you have recognized your selfish behavior and have begun to deal with it before God, now it is time to reconcile these issues with your spouse. My suggestion is to obey the command of the Apostle James. "*Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed*" (James 5:16).

If you want your marriage to be healed this is what you must do. Why is this action important? Because this is what Christians do when there has been an offense. What would actually happen if you were to confess what God has shown you concerning your own selfish behavior and ask your spouse for forgiveness

and prayer for change in your life? What would be the response from your spouse to this kind of humility and honesty? Don't you think that your mate would respond in a loving and gracious way? Wouldn't this action bring healing to your relationship and a new depth of intimacy and love?

Will you choose what pleases Him or what pleases you?

God requires this kind of humility and honesty in our relationships. Without it He will not bless your attempt to change these areas of your life. Solomon declared, "*He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy*" (Prov. 28:13). Don't let the sin of pride keep you from making a complete break with your selfish behavior.

In addition, when you confess your needs to your spouse you will not only attain a deeper intimacy with one another, but you will also receive the added benefit of his or her prayer support. Notice the rest of James 5:16. "*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*" Prayer together will avail great things that you have not yet seen. Don't you want this kind of help for your personal struggles with selfishness? What depth of intimacy could result if you could pray together about these issues! Don't miss this means to oneness.

5. Choose to love. In the proverb that I just quoted, two things are necessary for God (or anyone for that matter) to show mercy to someone: confessing and forsaking. Confession enables you to resolve the issue with your spouse and the forsaking of selfish behavior ensures your mate that you mean business. Choosing to love in circumstances in which you were

formerly living selfishly is the only way you will be able to forsake selfish behavior. Forsaking is the choice to love.

Let me suggest a simple and practical way to begin choosing to love. Go back again to your list of selfish behaviors and simply begin to do the exact opposite of every item listed. As I shared with you previously, selfishness is completely contrary to love. Therefore, if you have demonstrated selfishness when your spouse has asked for your help around the house, you must turn and choose to lovingly give when the next request comes. If you use anger to selfishly intimidate, put this to death by the Holy Spirit and allow His love to begin to control you. If you struggle with demanding your way, turn and begin to compromise. When a decision must be made over issues that really make no difference, allow your mate to make the choice instead of insisting on your way.

Remember, your ultimate example must be Jesus Christ, who *“did not please Himself”* (Rom. 15:3). He chose to love each one of us to the point of laying down His own life in service to the Father. If you sincerely care for your spouse, you will serve and give of yourself in the same manner. May you have the heart to do as He has done for you!

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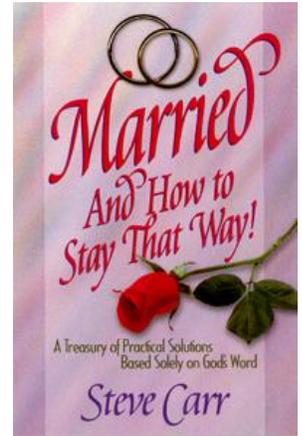
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