

couples daily devotion



My beloved is mine, and I am his.
Song of Solomon 2:16

COUPLES DEVOTIONS

Taken from Dr. Dobson's "Focus on the Family" Online Crosstalk Couples Devotions

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February 1

STICKS AND STONES

"The poison of vipers is on their lips." Psalm 140:3

The old adage "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" simply isn't true. Anyone who has felt the stinging barb of criticism knows that words can deeply wound. Lewis Yablonsky, author of *Fathers and Sons*, observed the effect such negative comments had on his own father. At the dinner table, Lewis's mother would say things like, "Look at your father! His shoulders are bent down; he's a failure.

He doesn't have the courage to get a better job or make more money. He's a beaten man." Yablonsky's father never defended himself. He just kept staring at his plate.

Psychologist and author Abraham Maslow once said, "It takes nine affirming comments to make up for each critical comment we give to our children." Adults aren't immune to criticism and put-downs either. Let's focus on the positive traits our partner brings to our marriage. Why not list them? Then point them out—daily and lovingly—to our mate.

Just between us . . .

- Is there a negative comment from your childhood that stays with you? How did it make you feel?
- Do we need to be more affirming and less critical? How can we improve?
- How did Jesus affirm others? (For examples, look at Matthew 16:17–19; 26:6–13; Luke 7:44–48; and John 1:47–48.)
- In what areas of your life are you discouraged? How can I lift you up?

Dear Father, we're deeply sorry for any harmful words we've aimed at each other lately. Please forgive us, and help us to forgive each other. We long to do better at using only words that build, heal, encourage, and affirm. Help us, we pray. Amen.

February 2

ERROR OR OPPORTUNITY?

"An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."

Proverbs 12:25

Many years ago, at what was then Standard Oil Company, an executive's mistake cost the firm more than two million dollars. On the day the news leaked, the firm's employees feared the wrath of the

powerful head of the company—John D. Rockefeller—and found various ways to avoid him. One partner, however, kept his previously scheduled appointment. When he walked into the president's office, he saw Rockefeller writing on a pad of paper.

"Oh, it's you, Bedford," Rockefeller said calmly. "I suppose you've heard about our loss?" The partner said that he had. "I've been thinking it over," Rockefeller said, "and before I ask the man to discuss the matter, I've been making some notes." Across the top of the page was written, "Points in favor of Mr. _____." There followed a long list of the man's virtues, including a description of how the executive had helped the firm make the right decision on three separate occasions. Since the earnings from these decisions had added up to many times the cost of the recent error, Rockefeller told Bedford that he had decided to seize the opportunity to encourage the executive instead of censure him.

The next time your spouse fails you, you could cut him or her down in a torrent of angry words . . . or you could see a golden opportunity to encourage.

Just between us . . .

- When was I most encouraging to you during a crisis?
- Is there a particular Scripture verse you cling to during tough times?

Lord, we so often underestimate how much influence our words can have. We ask for wisdom to speak encouragement—especially when criticism might be expected. Amen.

- Illustration from More of . . . The Best of Bits and Pieces, ed. Rob Gilbert (Fairfield, N.J.: The Economics Press, 1997). Reprinted in Stories for a Man's Heart, comp. Al and Alice Gray (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999).

February 3

YOUR FATHER'S ARMS

"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father . . . encourage your hearts and strengthen you."

2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

A talented young athlete, the son of a star baseball player, was struggling in the minor leagues and expected to be released any day. During one game, he came to bat having already struck out once and quickly rang up two more strikes. Then the catcher trotted away for a conference with the pitcher. The umpire, standing behind the plate, spoke to the young man. "You hold the bat just the way your dad held it," he said. "I can see his genes in you. You have your father's arms." On the next pitch, the young man knocked the ball out of the park. His play improved remarkably, and soon he was called up to the major leagues. When asked what changed his game, the young man gave credit to the umpire's words. "After that," he explained, "whenever I swung the bat, I just imagined that I was using Dad's arms instead of my own."

In your ministry of encouragement in your marriage, remember to use your Father's arms. Maybe you recall the biblical example of Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement." The Bible says he was "full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24), and his gift was invaluable in helping the apostle Paul lead others to Christ during their missionary journeys.

Do you sometimes feel inadequate to help others? God Himself is ready to encourage you—and to bless you with His strength to encourage those you love.

Just between us . . .

- What's your favorite form of encouragement?
- In what ways do I encourage you without words?
- How can we best tap into God's resources to encourage each other?

Almighty God, thank You for Your gifts of encouragement and comfort to us. Help us to draw on Your strength as we encourage one another. Amen.

• Illustration by Barbara Johnson from *We Brake for Joy!* by Patsy Clairmont, Barbara Johnson, Marilyn Meberg, Luci Swindoll, Sheila Walsh, and Thelma Wells (Women of Faith, Inc., 1998). Reprinted in *Stories for a Man's Heart*, comp. Al and Alice Gray (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999).

February 4

Behind Every Success . . .

"Let us encourage one another." Hebrews 10:25

It's been said that behind every successful man is a great woman. The wife of one of the most famous names in literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was probably one such woman. Sophia Hawthorne secretly set aside a few dollars each week, a savings that eventually grew large enough to support them both for a year. You see, Sophia believed that her husband would one day be a great writer. When Hawthorne came home and announced in disgrace that he'd been fired from his job in a customhouse, Sophia presented him with the money, saying, "Now you can write your book!" Her confidence and encouragement led to one of America's classic novels, *The Scarlet Letter*.

Then there was the corporate chief who, while traveling with his wife, pulled their car into a rundown gas station. They discovered that his wife had dated the gas station attendant in high school. "Boy, are you lucky I came along," bragged the husband after they left. "If you had married him, you would be the wife of a gas station attendant."

"My dear," replied the wife, "if I had married him, he would be the chief executive officer, and you would be the gas station attendant."

It's certainly true that one spouse has tremendous influence on the success of the other. Jim has supported me in my spiritual life, in the raising of our children, and in so many other areas. Likewise, I have attempted to bolster him however I could and have seen God's blessing on his work and ministry. And Jim lets me know he appreciates my encouragement. He has said more than once that I believed in him before he believed in himself. Of course, we've fallen short of this supportive ideal on more than one occasion—and you probably will, too. But if you consistently strive to bring strong and steady encouragement to your mate, you'll both reap lasting rewards.

- Shirley M Dobson

February 5

TO FIGHT OR NOT TO FIGHT? THE ARGUMENT

by Gigi Graham Tchividjian

He walked out, closing the door firmly behind him. I heard the car drive away, and with a heavy, aching heart, I leaned against the closed door. Hot, angry tears filled my eyes, spilled over, and ran down my cheeks. How had it happened? How had things built to this point? Neither of us had intended our little discussion to develop into a heated disagreement. But it was late, and we had both experienced a hard day.

Stephan had risen early to drive for the car pool. Then he had seen several patients with difficult, heartbreaking problems. An emergency had taken up his lunch break, and he had been behind schedule for the rest of the afternoon. When he finally left the office, he hit a traffic jam on the freeway and arrived home tense and tired to a wife with seven children, all demanding his attention.

I, too, had endured a difficult day after a sleepless night with the baby. Besides the normal responsibilities involved with running a home, rain had kept us confined indoors all day. It was humid, and the children were more quarrelsome than usual, amusing themselves by picking on each other. Between settling arguments and soothing hurt feelings, I managed to get dinner on the table. But I hadn't had time to comb my hair or freshen my makeup, and Stephan could sense my frustration when he came in.

Finally, when the kitchen was clean, the small children bathed and tucked into bed, and the teenagers talked out, Stephan and I found our-selves alone in our bedroom, trying to discuss a minor problem. It soon blew out of proportion. Angry feelings were vented, words spoken that we did not mean, and then—a slammed door and retreating car.

I slumped into a chair, dissolving into tears of discouragement and disappointment in myself. How long was it going to take to learn my lesson? Late at night, especially after a wearisome day, is not the time for arguing, but for comfort, encouragement, and loving.

As I sat there, I remembered that I had been so busy trying to handle the home front, keeping everything and everyone under control, that I had not spent time with the Lord that day. I had even failed to pray for Stephan. No wonder things had not gone well.

I glanced in the mirror and saw red, puffy eyes, no makeup, and hair in disarray. I saw lines of fatigue and tension where there should have been tenderness and love, and I understood Stephan's desire to get away and cool off.

I fell on my knees beside the chair, asking the Lord to forgive me and to fill me with His Holy Spirit so I could be to Stephan all he had ever dreamed. I asked for the Lord's strength, His sensitivity, His wisdom, so I could juggle my own schedule, the demands of my home and children, and still have time to meet my husband's needs when he came home from the day's work. Then I added a timid P. S. asking Him to give Stephan a change of heart, too.

I felt peace and a sudden refreshing. I got up, washed my face, added a little color to my cheeks and lips, combed my hair, lavished perfume on myself, and climbed into bed to wait.

Before long, I heard the front door open and familiar footsteps in the brick hallway. Our bedroom door opened quietly and Stephan stood there, his tired face and kind, loving eyes drawing me like a magnet. I flew into his arms. Later, our loving erased the last traces of frustration and anger. Clinging to each other as we fell into a much-needed sleep, I couldn't help wondering why we hadn't thought of this in the first place.

LOOKING FORWARD . . .

Conflict in marriage is inevitable: You can't live with someone every day of your life without occasional friction. In too many of today's marriages, however, fights are the rule rather than the exception.

A sixth-grade teacher shared with me the results of a writing project assigned to her class. She asked the kids to complete a series of sentences that began with the phrase "I wish. . . ." She was shocked and saddened by the response. Instead of writing about toys, animals, and trips to theme parks, twenty of the thirty kids made reference to the breakup of their families or conflict at home.

Let's talk this next week about what we can do to reduce conflict in marriage and to make sure that when we do disagree, it's something worth arguing about.

- James C Dobson

- "The Argument" by Gigi Graham Tchividjian. Taken from *Weather of the Heart* by Gigi Graham Tchividjian. © 1993. Used by permission of Baker Book House Company.

February 6

DIFFERING ASSUMPTIONS

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." - Romans 15:5

As in last night's story, "The Argument," a difficult day can quickly lead to an unnecessarily heated exchange between spouses. Fatigue, problems with the kids or job, illness, or financial worries can make anyone more susceptible to a fight. So can the condition I (JCD) call "differing assumptions." For example, after a particularly grueling series of speaking appearances some years ago, I came dragging home on Friday night feeling I'd earned a day off. I planned to watch a USC-Alabama football game on TV the next day. That seemed like a reasonable plan for a guy who had been out earning a living day and night. Shirley, on the other hand, had been running our home and watching the kids for six weeks and felt it was time I pitched in on a few chores. It was entirely reasonable for Shirley to think that she deserved some help at home after doing "domestic duty" for six weeks. Our assumptions collided about ten o'clock Saturday morning. Harsh words froze our relationship for three days. It was a stupid fight, but understandable in light of factors like overwork, fatigue, selfishness, and very different views of what the other was thinking.

When we're making our own plans we need to remember to consider our partner's mental and physical state. During stressful circumstances, we should take extra care to communicate our expectations ahead of time.

Just between us . . .

- Have differing assumptions caused us to argue recently?
- How can I do a better job of being aware of your mood?
- Do we communicate our expectations ahead of time?

Lord, by Your Spirit, help us to be aware of each other's needs and to take care in our communication. Draw us together in unity and in love of You. Amen.

February 7

FIGHT FAIR

"Remind the people . . . to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all."

Titus 3:1–2

Since some conflict in marriage is inevitable, learning to fight fair just might be the most important skill a couple can master. The key is to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy combat. In an unstable marriage, hostility is aimed at the partner's soft underbelly with comments such as "You never do anything right!" "Why did I marry you in the first place?" and "You're getting more like your mother every day!"

These offensive remarks strike at the heart of self-worth. Healthy conflict, by contrast, focuses on the issues that cause disagreement: "It upsets me when you don't tell me you're going to be late for dinner," or "I was embarrassed when you made me look foolish at the party last night." Can you hear the difference?

Even though these approaches may be equally contentious, the first assaults the dignity of the partner, while the second addresses the source of conflict. Couples who learn this important distinction are much better prepared to work through disagreements without wounds and insults.

Just between us . . .

- When we have a fight, are we more likely to attack the person and miss the problem, or to attack the problem and protect the person?
- What did Jesus say about yielding to others when we are unfairly attacked or criticized? (See Matthew 5:38–41; Luke 6:27–31.)
- How would doing a better job of fighting fair help our relationship?
- How can we support each other in doing this?

Father, we need Your help to show love and respect while we resolve differences. We don't want disagreements to hurt the relationship You've graciously given us. We know Your power and wisdom can be ours each day, and we humbly ask for them. Amen.

February 8

THE LINE OF RESPECT

“Show proper respect to everyone.” 1 Peter 2:17

Conflict can often play a positive role in marriage—especially when it helps maintain lines of respect. Suppose I (JCD) work at my office two hours later than usual on a

particular night. I know that Shirley is preparing a candlelight dinner, yet I don’t call to let her know I’ll be late. As the evening wears on, Shirley wraps the cold food in foil and puts it in the refrigerator. When I finally get home, I don’t apologize. Instead, I sit down with the newspaper and abruptly tell Shirley to get my dinner ready. You can bet there would be fireworks in the Dobson household that night! Shirley would rightfully interpret my insensitive behavior as insulting and would move to defend the “line of respect” between us. Her strong feelings would be totally justified.

Let’s put the shoe on the other foot. Suppose Shirley knows I need the car at 2:00 P.M. for some important purpose, but she deliberately keeps me waiting. Perhaps she sits in a restaurant with a friend, drinking coffee and talking. Meanwhile, I’m pacing the floor at home wondering where she is. It is very likely that she will hear about my dissatisfaction when she gets home. Even though the offense was minor, the line of respect has been violated.

Some things are worth defending. At the top of the list is the “line of respect” between husbands and wives.

Just between us . . .

- When was the last time we had a fight that was good for our relationship?
- Have I crossed your line of respect recently?
- How will upholding the line of respect improve our marriage?

Dear Lord, we want to show respect for each other, but we confess that we’re too often self-centered and insensitive. Forgive us, Lord. Grant us Your grace as we defend the mutual rights that are the foundation of our affection. Amen.

February 9

AFTER THE FIGHT

“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” Ephesians 4:26

Sometimes it’s not the fight itself that’s damaging, but what happens when the battle is over. Think for a moment about your own verbal spats with your mate. Do they usually result in a time of healing, or are issues left hanging for a “rematch” later on? Do you and your spouse agree to leave an argument behind after you’ve talked it out, or is there a prolonged period of distance and silence?

In unstable marriages, conflict is never entirely resolved. Resentment and hurt feelings accumulate over time and eventually turn to bile in the soul, which then erodes the relationship from within. But in healthy relationships, confrontation allows ventilation that ends in forgiveness, a drawing together, and a better understanding of each other.

After an argument with your spouse, ask yourself these four important questions: Are there things I've said or done that have grieved my partner? Do I need to ask forgiveness for attacking the self-worth of my spouse? Have I refused to let go of an issue even though I said it was settled? Are there substantive matters that haven't been resolved? Then move to put an end to the conflict—before the sun goes down.

Just between us . . .

- In our last fight, did we resolve the issue in question?
- Do our conflicts usually end positively, or with hurt feelings and unanswered questions?
- What changes would help us resolve conflicts “before the sun goes down”?

Lord, give us the maturity and strength to settle our disagreements quickly and without damaging the personhood of each other. We know that this is Your will for us, but we need Your guidance to live by it. Amen.

February 10

HOLY MOTIVES

“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” John 15:10

During Jesus’ time on earth, He was the epitome of love and compassion—yet He was also surrounded by conflict. He didn’t hesitate to set the Pharisees straight when they spoke or acted against God’s will. Jesus even rebuked Peter when His disciple rejected the prophecy that Christ would suffer and die (Mark 8:31–33). But Jesus’ motives were pure and perfect. He never intended His words to harm His listeners; rather, He spoke from a heart of love for His children.

We urge you to consider your motives when the temptation arises to do battle with your mate. Is your aim to lovingly enlighten, or to prove you are “right”? Are you reacting to another problem that has nothing to do with your partner? Is this really an important issue, or are you just blowing off steam at the expense of your spouse?

As long as we remember Christ’s motives for conflict and follow His example, we will “remain in his love,” and our marriages will move down the right path.

Just between us . . .

- During our last dispute, did you feel that my goal was to “lovingly enlighten,” or to win the battle?
- During conflicts in our marriage, how can we be more like Jesus?
- Have I wounded your spirit during times of disagreement? If so, will you forgive me?

Lord Jesus, You were no stranger to the challenges of conflict, and we thank You for Your inspiring example. How much we want to be like You and to do Your will. Show us Your wisdom in new ways as we seek to mature in this area. Amen.

February 11

WHEN THE TOP FLIES OFF

“Be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” 2 Corinthians 13:11

Because of our family ministry and Jim’s background as a psychologist, I sometimes wonder if people think that our marriage is somehow “different”—that we live in a dreamlike state of wedded bliss where conflict doesn’t exist. Believe me, that’s just not the case. We do our share of fussing and face the same struggles you do, whether it’s motivated by fatigue, worry about the kids, not communicating our expectations properly, or something else.

I recall an incident after we were engaged that seems funny now, but wasn’t so amusing at the time. Jim owned a 1949 Mercury convertible called “Old Red.” It was a disaster. The top wouldn’t go up or down; the electric windows didn’t work; the lights sometimes went out unexpectedly; and the engine had a habit of dying regularly. Every Sunday afternoon we took it out for a push. Worse, the front seat had springs sticking out at odd angles that snagged my clothes and made for a most uncomfortable ride. I hated that car, but Jim didn’t want to go into debt to buy a new one.

The coup de grace came the day Jim picked me up for an important job interview. I was wearing my best outfit, a black suit. As we sped down the road at fifty miles per hour, the convertible top suddenly blew off. Bits of string and canvas beat at our heads as dust flew every-where. The remnants of the old top hooked onto the back of the car and flapped in the air like Superman’s cape.

Jim was so irritated at the car that he wouldn’t stop. He just kept barreling down the highway with the ribs of the top glistening above us. I screamed at him from under the dashboard, where I was crouched to escape the pieces of Old Red that were still flying about. Between his car falling apart and my screaming, Jim got even angrier.

Somehow we survived the day when both of us—and Old Red—blew our tops. Jim bought a newer car a few months later and, more importantly, we didn’t call off our engagement!

That’s how life is when you climb into the marvelous vehicle called marriage. You’re in for a long and wonderful ride. Expect the unexpected to happen. It will probably rattle your nerves and set you at odds with each other, and the top may even blow off every now and then. But if you share a committed love, you can survive those unexpected and unwanted conflicts. We have—for forty years now.

- Shirley M Dobson

February 12

FOR THE DAYS YOU DON’T LIKE YOUR SPOUSE

As much as I don’t like to admit it, I’m not always the easiest husband to like. My wife and I share many of the same interests (after all, that’s how eHarmony matched us up), but my laissez-faire attitude on certain matters can be a bit frustrating to my born planner wife.

However, our differences aren’t as great as in some marriages, where those opposites attracted... and led to some difficult discussions later on. Such is the case with Amie and Darrin Patrick, the lead pastor of The Journey in St. Louis. Amie writes:

“In general, though, we’re wired very differently. The ways in which we approach life often lie on opposite ends of the spectrum. Much of the time, we’re profoundly grateful for God’s design in our union. Our respective strengths and weaknesses create a helpful and beautiful balance. We don’t have far to go to find an opinion or perspective that will likely be quite different from our own. We’re less likely to excuse one another’s sins and weaknesses. The flip side of the coin, however, is that we also have to work really hard to understand, accept, and appreciate the differences in each other. Frankly, learning to do this has been significantly more difficult than we expected.”

How does the couple deal with the days when differences lead to tensions? Simple. They embrace them.

“...We truly desire a marriage where we honor and enjoy one another’s differences as gifts from God. Over the years we’ve definitely found that the hard work that helps us appreciate and enjoy one another more is usually practical and specific. We’re learning to approach our moments of tension and irritation with each other as God-ordained opportunities to build a stronger marriage. In light of that goal, there are a couple steps of repentance and action we try to practice regularly.”

First, they confess the struggle to God.

Complaining or pretending may be easier, but admitting our own need for help in our marriage allows us to see God working on our relationship. We have to humble ourselves first instead of immediately trying to “fix” our spouse.

Then, they differentiate between personality differences, preferences, and sin.

The truth is that much of what frustrates us in marriage often boils down to our preferences in how someone should act. Just because they take a different approach doesn’t mean it’s the wrong approach. We have to examine our motivations.

In a recent blog post on BibleStudyTools.com, Pastor Ron Edmondson also understood the challenges that married couples can face. That’s why he subscribes to his “7 Commandments of a Great Marriage”:

“Thou shalt serve one another. A good marriage practices mutual submission. Ephesians 5:21 commands us to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. Marriage is not a 50/50 deal. It’s a 100/100 deal—each willing to surrender all to the other person.

“How are you at serving your spouse? Would they say you strive to serve them more everyday? Are you more the giver or the taker in the relationship? Be honest.

“Thou shalt love unconditionally. Unconditionally means without conditions. (See how deep this blog can be.) I’ll love you if... is not the command. It’s I’ll love you even if not. God commands us to love our enemies. How much more should this commitment be strong within a marriage?

“Are you loving your spouse even with the flaws that you can see better than anyone else? Here’s a quick test: Does the way you communicate with your spouse indicate you have the highest regard for them—always?”

What about you? What advice do you have for when you don’t like something your spouse does or a difficult personality difference? How have you kept your marriage strong?

February 13

15 WAYS TO UNLOCK TRUE LOVE IN YOUR MARRIAGE

Editor's Note: The following is a report on the practical applications of Bill and Pam Farrel's new book *The Secret Language of Successful Couples* (Harvest House Publishers, 2014).

Just as you must know and use codes to gain access to many parts of your everyday life – such as computers, bank accounts, workstations, gates, and remote controls – you need an access code for your marriage to work as well as God has designed it to work. If you aren't using the code, every part of your relationship with your spouse will be out of sync. But with the code, you can access your spouse's heart and unlock the love that you're both meant to share in your marriage.

Here are the principles that together comprise your marriage's access code:

Help your husband feel more successful. God has created men with a fundamental need to feel successful. Men will respond positively to their wives when they feel confident that they are succeeding in their marriages. Compliment your husband regularly and sincerely, and thank him for what he does to enrich your marriage.

Help your wife feel more secure. God has created women with a fundamental need to feel secure. Women will respond positively to their husbands when they feel confident that they are safe and cared for in their marriages. Let your wife know that you value her for who she is and what she contributes to people's lives. Notice her efforts and express your gratitude to her often.

Flirt with your husband. Husbands need their wives to continue to invest in maintaining a fulfilling sex life. Never stop flirting with your husband, and make time to have sex with him as often as possible.

Provide for your wife. Wives need their husbands to provide contributions to the marriage that promote her sense of security (such as emotional stability, friendship, and financial income). So do your best to treat her well and care for her.

Make your husband's life simpler. Husbands are most satisfied with their marriages when their lives are simple. So help get rid of unnecessary stress in your husband's life so he can relax as much as possible.

Listen to your wife. Wives are most satisfied with their marriages when their husbands genuinely listen to the thoughts and feelings they express. So listen to your wife regularly, letting her know that you truly are fascinated with her and what she has to say.

Give each other grace. Keep in mind that, while you both should try your best to love and respect each other in your marriage, you're both bound to struggle with sin and make mistakes as a result. So don't expect perfection from each other. Instead, extend grace to each other every day – just as God does with you. Ask God to help you be patient with your spouse when he or she is slow to change and grow in certain areas. Encourage your spouse and trust God to help your spouse grow in the right timing.

Be affectionate with each other. Touch each other in loving ways often (such as through hugs and back rubs), compliment your spouse on his or her unique abilities to bless you and other people, and use affectionate words when communicating with each other.

Enjoy a fun friendship with each other. Play together by going on dates regularly to enjoy recreational activities. Laugh together as often as possible. Influence each other equally, respecting each other as true partners. Learn something new about your spouse often so you're always getting to know each other better. Find the right pace for your lifestyle so neither of you feels frustrated or stressed as you each pursue goals.

Resolve conflicts well. Talk with your spouse about what triggers each of you to get angry, and why. Keep in mind that while you can't control your spouse's anger, you can control your own – as well as the way you respond to your spouse. Take responsibility for your part in inflaming conflicts and aim to do all you can to work through conflicts calmly and productively. When you and your spouse disagree, pray together, asking God to give you wisdom. Identify what the real issue is and give each other equal opportunities to talk about the issue from each of your different perspectives. Take turns listening carefully to each other. Then discuss possible solutions, take a break to reflect on them, and get back together in a day or two to figure out how to proceed in a mutually beneficial way. Learn from your conflicts by discovering how your negative emotions can be turned to positive emotions the next time the same issues arise between you.

Pursue a satisfying sex life together. Tell each other what specific ways you can best turn each other on sexually. After you discuss each other's preferences, plan how to keep your sex life fresh and fun, but agree to do only what you both are comfortable doing. Try praying both before and after sex to maximize the bond it creates between you. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower both of you to be completely faithful to each other sexually and create an atmosphere of trust in your marriage so you'll feel sexually free with each other during intimacy.

Deactivate alarms in your marriage. Understand what usually motivates each other when making decisions, and be careful not to ignore or overrun your spouse so you can make decisions as a team with each other's best interests in mind. Work together to undo toxic decisions, replacing them with choices that promote vulnerability, productivity, and accountability in your marriage.

Set career goals cooperatively. Take turns developing each of your careers according to the unique abilities and earning power that each of you have. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you both balance your work and family responsibilities fairly so that both of you can make your contributions and your relationship thrives.

Design a budget that reflects the best of who you are as a couple. Maximize your financial impact together by coordinating your financial goals with each of your motivational styles. Track your income and expenses, but also use your money to pursue each other's hopes and dreams.

Create an emotionally healthy environment. Encourage each other to be open, honest, and vulnerable when expressing thoughts and feelings in your marriage. Use loving body language, a gentle tone of voice, and kind words when communicating with each other.

Discuss: What specific items in this list apply to you? What are you going to do to implement some of these things in your marriage?

Pray: Lord Help me to actively pursue engaging with healthy habits in my marriage.

February 14

INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

My lover is mine and I am his. Song of Songs 2:16

These are words of belonging, words that for an engaged couple can generate tender imagining and anticipation of what life together will be. Lived out by a married couple, these words can hold together in intimacy what much of the world seems to be determined to break apart. Intimacy in marriage, sexual and otherwise, was created by God and is to be fought for, delighted in, and fiercely guarded.

To yield to one another sexually in marriage is to step into God-created intimacy that takes us out of ourselves and into places where the walls can crumble and we can be tenderly vulnerable and real. There is peace and expansiveness of heart that come with this intimacy; one that offers such glorious contrast to the confusion and momentum of the world.

We must be willing to fight for intimacy in our marriages and to fiercely guard it. We fight for it by being attentive to each other's hearts; by yielding to God in a way that allows us to more easily yield to one another. We guard it by being intentional, considering what pulls us from intimacy and stepping away from those places, considering what brings us life and stepping deliberately into those places.

My lover is mine and I am his; we long to belong. Marriage, as a coming together before God, offers a sense of belonging that mirrors our belonging to the Father. While the vulnerability that intimacy brings is sometimes hard or scary to step into, it is such a wonderfully holy place that God gives us, a place of delighting in one another that echoes of the Father's delight in us.

Let's Talk

Why does stress or turmoil unrelated to your spouse pull you away from your spouse? Have you considered intimacy with your spouse as a special place that God has created? What does it mean to you to guard intimacy? What does it mean to be intentional with intimacy?

Father, forgive me the places where, although I long to belong, I rebel under your covering. Forgive me the places where I choose not to yield. Let me delight so much in You that I can delight in the one you have given me in marriage, that together we might be Yours.

February 15

5 REASONS CHURCH IS GOOD FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

If you ask my husband Ted why church is good for marriage, he'll most likely quip, "I met my wife at church. That was good for my marriage."

Wit aside, though, Ted takes being an active member of our local church seriously. So do I. In the decade since we first met, we've been purposeful as a couple to make regular church attendance, as well as active participation, a consistent part of our lives.

Why?

Well, primarily because Scripture encourages us to do so.

Just read through the book of Acts. Here Luke illustrates the beauty of believers living life together. Of fellow Jesus-lovers walking through the daily grind hand-in-hand as they learn, love, and live the gospel. Then, later in the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews instructs us, “And let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (10:24-25). We’re actually told not to neglect the kind of fellowship found in church.

And do you know what Ted and I have found over the years? Church really is good for our marriage. It’s benefited us and helped to strengthen our bond.

Before I tell you how church can be good for marriage, I want to stress that when I say “church,” I mean a healthy, life-giving body of believers. I realize that there are dysfunctional congregations out there. Ones that might not be so ideal for your marriage. Maybe some of you have attended them. But, there are also a lot of strong, healthy, life-giving ones. In most cases, I’ve found that you just have to seek them out.

So why is church good for my marriage and yours? Here are five things Ted and I have experienced.

1. Church Provides Shared Experiences

A huge part of married life is shared experiences. Shared experiences come from doing the day-to-day of life together and making memories with one another in the process. For Ted and me, church offers another opportunity for this. We wake up together, get the kids ready together, drive together, sit together, worship together, drive home together, and sometimes eat lunch out together with our girls. When workweek jobs and responsibilities require we spend a lot of time apart, church brings us together.

2. Church Sparks Conversation

We all know that life is hectic. It takes effort to slow down and find time to have the deep conversations with each other. Here’s the thing: Church helps facilitate deep conversations. Whether it’s a message from one of our pastors or a study within our small group, time spent under gospel-centered teaching sparks conversation between Ted and me. It gets us talking deeper than the latest episode of House we watched on Netflix or whether the Spanish curriculum we’re teaching our daughters is working. It sparks conversations on what God is teaching us individually or an area we’re struggling with spiritually.

3. Church Provides Opportunities to Serve Together

The apostle Paul often wrote of and to those who partnered with him in sharing the gospel. Church offers couples the opportunity to partner together in sharing the gospel too. How? Through serving others. For example, Ted and I facilitate a small group as a couple. We have friends who volunteer in children’s ministry side-by-side, and others who lead the congregation in music together. As we work together for a shared purpose, I’ve found that we’re drawn closer to each other as well.

4. Church Offers Support and Accountability

When we experienced a miscarriage, members of our church community loved, comforted, and prayed for us. When Ted lost his job and our finances were tight, friends from church blessed us in tangible, practical ways. In each situation, friends from church encouraged and supported us as a

couple, reminding us to keep our focus on Christ and stay strong in our love for one another. In my book, *Team Us: Marriage Together*, Ted shares, “The love of God is constant. It’s a rock; it doesn’t fluctuate. Ashleigh and I find that kind of comforting stability among His people, within His church. When jobs and hometowns and circles of friends change, we make it a priority to include ‘church’ as a common theme, one that provides equilibrium through the plot twists of life.”

5. Church Fosters Spiritual Unity

As Ted and I sit under gospel-centered teaching and actively discuss it, we stay on the same page spiritually. We find ourselves wrestling with theology together, and it further serves to unite us. We’re not the only ones who’ve found this to be true. One friend told me that “worshipping God together is a great way to keep both pairs of eyes looking in the same direction.” Another shared, “We’ve learned so much about patience, forgiveness, and being truly one by staying connected to a church.”

Your marriage may not have gotten its start in church like ours did, but I encourage you to make it a consistent part of your relationship now. Discover together the many other ways that church can indeed be good for marriage.

Ashleigh Slater

February 16

SMALL WONDER

We have done only that which we ought to have done. Luke 17:10

When you think about the great humanitarian efforts achieved by the advance of Christianity over the years, you possibly think of hospitals and rescue missions and hunger relief. But perhaps the power of Christianity is proven best every day in homes and families and marriages like yours—when people who are self-centered by nature put their spouse’s needs before their own. It’s something He only accomplishes in us when we do the following:

1. Put Christ first in all things. When Barbara and I signed the “Title Deed” of our lives over to Christ as a young married couple, we officially gave Him everything that was ours—all rights to our lives, dreams and possessions.

Have we ever failed to remember the One who really owns our hopes, dreams and possessions? Sure. But whenever we’ve been tempted to live for ourselves, we’ve always been able to look each other in the eye and remember a time when we submitted everything of ours into His keeping and signed that title deed.

2. Give up all rights and entitlements. Paul said, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all” (1 Corinthians 9:19). Not a slave to some, but to all. And just as a slave relinquishes all rights to personal time and desires, we as Christ’s followers are commanded to put others above ourselves. It’s the only way to be the kind of wife or husband God intends us to be.

3. Be selfless in the little things. Sometimes I don’t want to get out of my favorite chair to help Barbara carry in the groceries, sweep the kitchen or clean a toilet bowl. But it’s in these minor,

everyday moments that we teach our selfish selves who is boss. This is part of what the Bible means when it tells us to “learn to do good” (Isaiah 1:17)—to constantly choose death to self, to always choose sacrificial love until it becomes our first response.

DISCUSS

Who owns your life? Your dreams? Your possessions? Consider formally signing a title deed of your life, and give God 100 percent ownership. There’s great freedom that will result from this transaction!

PRAY

Pray that submissiveness to God’s will and the needs of others will be your true desire.

February 17

GREENER EVERY DAY

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

Colossians 2:6-7

Not long after I was born in 1948, someone gave my mother a little blue ceramic vase shaped in the form of baby booties. And in that vase was a small philodendron plant. Not that special.

I brought that vase home from my mother’s house a few years ago. Its edges were a bit calcified—a crust of minerals had been left after the evaporation of all the water that had been poured into it over the years. But that original green plant was still in there. Still living. Still growing. In fact, when we added some fresh soil and a little plant food into the mix, it began to strengthen again.

Almost 60 years old, and still going strong.

To me, that little plant is an ongoing reminder of what happens when you are continually watered by the Word, when you’re repeatedly fed by relationship with our Creator and Sustainer. That plant sits there as old as I am—almost to the day—yet still maintains its health, vitality and potential for growth.

There’s life in being what God has called us to be. Life in obedience. Life in ongoing service and witness. Life in being a follower of Jesus Christ, finding our joy in seeking Him for daily direction and purpose.

Spiritual growth is a command from the Scriptures. As our passage for today says, “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.” But more than a command, it is God’s invitation to life and fulfillment, to become a person who is still growing at every age.

DISCUSS

Think of two or three areas where God has really been growing you lately. Name two or three other areas that could use some watering and feeding.

PRAY

Thank God for continuing to use us as reflections of His life and glory. And thank Him for being at work in us and making this happen.

February 18

PREVENT YOUR MARRIAGE FROM BECOMING A 'JUNK FOOD MARRIAGE'

Nancy C. Anderson

In this fast-food era of pizza delivery and speedy drive-through meals, it's easy to forgo a sit-down "real silverware" dinner. We often sacrifice nutrition for convenience.

Unfortunately, some of us have transferred this fast-food lifestyle to our marriages.

Our bodies' immune systems will start to falter if we're living on junk-food diets. And if we only have drive-through intimacy, our marriages may lose their immunity to worldly "germs." We all need to eat balanced diets and contrary to what the advertisers tell us, super-sized fries are not healthy vegetables. However, I think we can agree that peas are nutritious, so here are three "P"s that will feed your marriage.

Plan

Just as planning is important to the success of a meal, it's also vital to a marriage. Don't let your married life just happen. Plan time to be together. Society tells us that we all need more "me" time, but it's "we" time that will strengthen our marriages. A weekly date night is a great idea but if it's not practical to get away for a whole evening, find a way to meet for lunch or go for a walk after dinner.

My husband, Ron, and I sometimes cuddle on the couch, after our son has gone to bed, and watch old home videos of our lives together. We make a special effort to be alone and enjoy each others company. Try to avoid talk about work, children, or problems when you're on a date; concentrate on positive personal thoughts and goals.

Planning double dates with other Christian couples can also strengthen your marriage.

Choose a couple whose family is similar to yours—kids, interests, same general income—and you'll probably find that you have a lot in common. Seeing other couples react to each other and solve their conflicts has helped us work out our own problems.

Praise

After you've had a scrumptious meal in a fine restaurant, it is customary to say, "My compliments to the chef." However, we often forget to send our compliments to the woman who washed the socks or to the man who mowed the lawn. Ron and I have been married for 26 years, and our relationship has hit some emotional speed bumps that forced us to slow down and appreciate each other.

Last year we were devastated as we witnessed our friends' Christian marriage disintegrate. They were critical and unappreciative as they lost sight of what they originally liked about each other. They forgot that "Love doesn't keep score of the sins of others . . . and . . . love always looks for the best" (1 Corinthians 13).

Don't let your love be eroded by criticism. Instead, build each other up with praise. Ron has become my biggest fan and he often tells me that I'm smart, funny or pretty, and those compliments make

me want to please him by being even smarter, funnier and prettier. Compliments are like magnets, if you want your mate to be “attracted” to you, be generous with sincere praise.

Pray

Just as a prayer should be offered before each meal, it must be integrated into our daily marriage routine. The spiritual life of a marriage is a great indicator of the health of the whole relationship. Praying together is an intimate activity, and in order for it to be effective, it must be genuine and heartfelt. Ron didn't grow up in a Christian family, so it was hard for him to understand how important prayer was to our relationship, but he has learned that his prayers nourish me, our marriage, and our relationship with God.

When Ron prays for me, I feel as if I'm covered by a velvety blanket of protection. Even though I still face problems and setbacks, his prayers shelter me from the sharpness of the pain. He is strengthened by my prayers too and we both agree that we're less likely to fight if we're consistently praying together.

Every marriage has problems and conflicts, but don't be discouraged. Through prayer, God can give each of us His strength and comfort. He wants to build us up and encourage us as couples. You'll have the strength to face uncertain times if you both ask for the guidance of your Certain Savior.

There is a recipe for effective prayer, in Luke 11, where the Lord's prayer reminds us to forgive one another, as God has forgiven us. God is merciful to me and I have chosen to be merciful to my husband (except when he's tailgating or speeding).

Now, Get Cookin'!

February 19

5 WAYS TO CREATE GENTLE CONVERSATION WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Dr. David B. Hawkins

Are you anxious to be heard? Would you like someone to sit patiently while you tell them what is bothering you? Do you long for someone to hear your heart, more than just the words you are saying?

Most would answer 'yes' to those two questions. Most people are anxious to tell you what is on their hearts. They really simply want someone to care enough to ask them gentle questions. The key word here is 'gentle.'

This can be a delicate dance. If you ask too forcefully, the person to whom you are speaking will feel threatened. Able to discern that you aren't really asking to hear their heart but rather voice your agenda, they will close down.

“I really want my husband to care enough about what is percolating inside me to patiently ask me probing questions,” Susan said, her husband sitting across from her on the couch at The Marriage Recovery Center. “I want what is on my heart to be nudged out of me.”

Susan and Charles had been married only four years, with a young son and another on the way. Even though married just a short time, they were in a marriage crisis. Susan, a delicate woman appearing

depressed, had left Charles and agreed to reconcile only if they received depth help.

Charles didn't like what he heard.

"I can't read her mind," he said defensively. "I'm more than happy to hear what she tells me, but I can't ask twenty questions."

"Fair enough," I jumped in. "I don't think you should have to ask twenty questions, but you will have to be gently curious. This is a skill we all need to have. The ability to encourage our mate to share what is on their heart without being too blunt in the process."

"Seems like a lot of work for nothing," Charles said. "Why can't she just tell me? I ask her why she is feeling a certain way, or why she is doing what she is doing and she takes offense."

"Because I don't necessarily know what I'm thinking or why I'm doing what I'm doing," Susan said. "I need to be able to talk things out to know what is on my heart. Sometimes when you ask 'why' I hear criticism instead of curiosity."

Charles looked puzzled.

"Some people process internally," I said. "Some need to talk things out to know what they are thinking. I'm an external processor," I admitted. "I like my wife to ask me questions so I know what choices I want to make. How about you?"

"I guess I'm an internal processor," he said. "I want to be left alone to figure out what I think."

I smiled, acknowledging their two different styles. In each situation, however, both would need gentle curiosity to be able to have meaningful dialogue and open their hearts to each other.

I recommended the following to help them cultivate the skill of being 'gently curious.'

First, remain curious, not challenging. We never want to feel challenged when having a dialogue with our mate or others. We want to feel encouraged to share more. We want to be assured that others really care about us, about our heart, and what we are thinking and feeling.

Second, be wary of 'the why question.' While asking questions can be a great way to encourage dialogue, there are certain questions that can immediately shut a conversation down. Asking someone why they did what they did, or feel what they feel, can feel threatening. Something seemingly as innocuous as "Why did you leave the bread on the counter?" can feel challenging, shaming and is likely to evoke a defensive response. Be very careful in asking 'why' questions.

Third, encourage sharing. Being careful of asking 'why' questions, you can encourage your mate to tell you more about something. "I'd like to hear more about what happened at the meeting today." Gently probing, being mindful of cues your mate gives regarding their desire to share more, will help you.

Fourth, make note of when they are done sharing. We all reach a saturation point where we are ready to stop talking about something. A dialogue is a dance, and we must be careful not to step on our mate's toes. Watch for cues that suggest he/ she is done sharing. Allow for times of silence or pauses in a conversation.

Finally, be willing to reciprocate. We share to the depth and degree that others share with us. Be willing to share your own feelings and reactions as your mate is sharing their feelings and thoughts.

Again, watch for the dance. Notice the give and take.

In summary, we must be careful with our words. Scripture tells us, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18). Be careful with your words. Seek greater understanding of your mate, but do so gently.

February 20

AMERICAN DREAMERS

But godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Timothy 6:6

Whether you know it or not, your marriage is susceptible to the American Dream Syndrome—the notion that you can have it all, that you deserve it all. The more stuff you have, the better off you are. Desire to acquire. The slogans, like the wish lists, are practically endless.

Yet contrary to the seductive tune of the American Dream, enough is never enough. Getting more only fuels the urge to get more. So how do you learn to live within that truth without constantly feeling like your lives don’t measure up?

You embrace contentment.

Contentment arises from a spirit of gratefulness. It’s the courageous choice to thank God for what you have and for what you don’t have. Even when you don’t know where this week’s grocery money is coming from. Even when the washer goes on the blink. Even when the kids need braces. Even when your next-door neighbor drives home in a new car or is gone on a fabulous vacation to an exotic location.

The apostle Paul, who wrote the words that appear at the top of this page, knew how it felt to be beaten, shipwrecked and imprisoned. He knew the hardship of being pummeled with rocks and left for dead. But he also knew that God could be trusted. He knew his situation was being monitored by the all-wise awareness of his loving heavenly Father.

Occasionally, we all need to be reminded: Material things will never satisfy the hunger in our hearts. A couple who fails to see this could spend a lifetime chasing the American Dream, only to find it to be a desert mirage, forever just out of reach.

DISCUSS

What are three things you wish you owned? What are three circumstances you wish were different?

PRAY

Bring your needs and shortages before the Lord right now. Leave them there, thank Him for where He has you, and walk on embracing contentment.

February 21

HOLES IN THE WALL

Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all your ways be established. Proverbs 4:26

The Great Wall of China is one of the great wonders of the world, a true masterpiece of engineering. It's the only man-made structure that can be seen from outer space. Five to six horses could trot side by side on top of it. I've walked along it myself, and it is awesome to see this massive structure snake its way through the mountains.

The wall was built, of course, to protect China from invasion. Watchtowers and various battlements dot its construction at frequent intervals. But in the first hundred years after the wall was completed, enemies managed to invade the country three times, breaching the security of this enormous, rock-solid defense. How?

They didn't go over it. They didn't go through it. They didn't need to knock it down. Because while China was building this impenetrable defense system, it was apparently neglecting to build character into its children's lives.

All the invaders had to do was bribe the gatekeepers.

I think of that story whenever I hear parents talk of the dreams and goals they have for their children. Many parents today are vitally concerned with the education their kids receive and the skills they develop. They spend hours shuttling them to school and to various extracurricular activities, looking forward to the day when they will earn scholarships and enter the working world, establishing themselves in successful and lucrative careers. But none of these accomplishments are worth anything without the character to back them up.

It's our children's CQ, not their IQ—their “character quotient,” not their intelligence—that will secure their futures and enable them to stand strong in battle.

DISCUSS

Think of a time when you modeled character to your children—and they got the message! Talk about what you both need to do to develop each of your children's CQ.

PRAY

Ask for the faith to maintain your own integrity—and the opportunities for your children to see it in action.

February 22

WHY GOD COMES FIRST

When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God. Psalm 73:16-17

If you were asked to name three things that pose the gravest general threats to the health of today's marriages—and to your marriage in particular—what would be on your list? When Barbara and I were asked the same question recently, here are the three we gravitated toward:

Threat number one is not really knowing who God is. In his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A. W. Tozer wrote, “The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils among us.”

When we fail to attribute to God the majesty of His supreme position over us and all creation, we weaken our need to stay accountable to Him in our behaviors and attitudes toward each other. We also lower the healthy self-esteem that’s derived from measuring our value in the light of His love and grace. Tozer summed it up, “The most important thing you think is what you think about God.”

Threat number two is selfishness. This shows itself in numerous degrees, from not wanting to help fold socks . . . to not caring what our schedules are doing to our families . . . to outright adultery. But in reality, this second threat breeds on the first one. Lives that are being constantly molded and characterized by a fear of the Lord will move toward humility and self-denial rather than living to satisfy self.

Threat number three is lack of biblical skills in resolving conflict. Conflict happens in marriage. It is simply unavoidable. But many people are not fully aware of the wealth of scriptural truth on this subject. Just following the admonition of a verse like Ephesians 4:32—being “kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you”—will change your life.

DISCUSS

Which of these three threats strike the closest to where you are right now? What commitments should you make to each other to counteract them?

PRAY

Ask that you may see God in greater grandeur and glory with each passing day and that the resulting glow would enlighten and enliven your marriage.

February 23

5 WAYS TO SOOTHE CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE

Jay Lowder

“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who controls his spirit than he who takes a city”
Proverbs 16:32

I recently heard a national news story of a woman who was so angry with her son for talking back to her that she shot him. Although this is an extreme example, it’s a reminder that explosions of unleashed anger bring devastating consequences.

Anger is an emotion that is typically caused by frustration, pain or unresolved past hurt. Similar to an infection under the skin, anger festers until it breaks through the surface, oozes out and contaminates its surroundings. The venom of angry words and actions have killed more marriages, destroyed more friendships and wrecked more lives than any other behavior.

Dealing with feelings of anger can be handled in numerous ways. Some choose spontaneous reaction, which often spawns regretful words and retaliation from others. Others choose to suppress their feelings and not address the root cause of the problem, but ignoring issues never

brings solutions but instead usually gives a breeding ground for resentment, victim mentality, and bitterness.

God's choice is for us to approach those with whom we have offended or who have offended us with openness to our own faults, honesty, forgiveness, love and compassion. Only then do we have the ability to reconcile differences and diffuse a relationship bomb. If the other person's response is below our expectations, which it often is, then we have to ask God to help us contain our anger and make the decision to forgive. Forgiveness is nothing more than a repeated decision that God will enable you to make.

People are remembered for the problems they create or solve. While some issues are alleviated by a kind of righteous anger that is aimed at injustice, there are far more problems that are created than removed when people allow anger to go unchecked. Proverbs 25:28 says that a person who cannot control his emotions is like a city broken down without walls. Uncontrolled anger leaves us without a guardrail of protection. In another verse found in Proverbs 18:19 we are told that anger can keep us away from others like the bars on a castle.

In a conflict, here are five ways to initiate healing between yourself and your significant other.

1. Don't wait for them to make the first move. Pride is often the primary reason people wait for the other person to initiate reconciliation. Waiting for someone else to repair walls only leads to lingering trouble. God promises to lift those who are humble in James 4:10.
2. Start with sensitivity instead of solutions. Solving problems is the end goal but beginning with compassion works to accelerate an understanding of another's feelings and helps to avoid similar conflicts and misunderstandings in the future. We see in Matthew 9:36 that Jesus was moved with compassion when he saw people, and we should be the same.
3. Confess your fault and responsibility for the conflict. While it's easy to focus on wrongs committed by others, there are almost always some things we did or didn't do that helped create the problem. James 5:16 says that healing begins with confession.
4. Don't be defensive, but maintain an open heart and mind about actions you may have taken that were wrong, offensive or maybe even misunderstood. Proverbs 19:20 tells us to listen to advice and receive correction. When we are unwilling to recognize mistakes, failures or wrong actions, we are acting foolish and unable to grow.
5. Be a good hearer and focus more on listening than talking. It's wrongfully easy to not pay attention to what someone else is saying because we are thinking about what we will say in response. Jesus' half brother gave some of the best advice to diffuse relational conflict when he told us in James 1:19 to be quick to hear and slow to speak.

February 24

TAMING THE DRAGON

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

It can lie. It can gossip. It can slander. It can also murmur and complain. It can manipulate and flatter. It can tear down. It can paint itself in nice words, even while cutting someone to ribbons.

My friend Joe Stowell calls it “the dragon in our dentures.” Our tongue. It can truly be deadly.

On the other hand, when that “dragon” is under the power of the Holy Spirit, when we are daily training it to be submitted to Christ’s control and available for His use and purposes, He can transform it into an instrument that delivers encouragement.

I remember being in church one Sunday morning when I spotted a prominent local oncologist walking by. I’d been hearing about some special things he’d been doing with his cancer patients—some unique ways he was allowing God to minister through him in the course of practicing his profession. So I caught his attention and said, “Hey, I just wanted you to know I really appreciate what you’re doing. Do you realize what an incredible minister for Christ you are? You’re making quite a difference in our community.”

It was like I’d hit him with a stun gun. A dazed expression flashed across his face. And after a moment’s pause, he looked at me and said, “Really?” I said, almost laughing now, “Well, yeah. The things I’ve been hearing about the work you do are really inspiring. We could use a lot more Christ followers like you.”

He shook my hand and smiled. “You don’t know how much I needed to hear that this morning. Thank you.”

I was reminded again how often people just need a nod of encouragement in their journey, no matter how confident he or she may appear to be.

Shared a good word with someone lately?

DISCUSS

Think about some things you’ve been noticing in others that are really worth praising. Slay the dragon and encourage them.

PRAY

Ask God to make you and your words build up, not tear down.

February 25

I NEED YOU

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." 1 Corinthians 12:21

I still remember the first time I told my mom and dad, "I love you." Being a typically ungrateful, unexpressive teenager, I found looking my parents in the eye and saying those three little words excruciating.

I also remember the first time I told Barbara I loved her. My heart was jumping wildly. Adrenaline was the only thing flowing faster than the beads of sweat on my forehead. I wasn't sure either one of us would survive the experience!

Those are hard words to say to someone for the first time, aren't they? Telling another person "I love you" represents risk and vulnerability. Yet there are three other words that are often even harder to express: "I need you."

"I need you."

Oh, at one time they flowed fairly easily from your lips. Think back to those early days of romance and intrigue. She made you laugh. He made you feel secure and stable. She brought warmth into a room. His sensitivity made you feel valued and important.

Yes, saying "I need you" came effortlessly at first. But sometime after your wedding day, the thief of familiarity can steal that sense of need. You go your own way. You think you know best. You figure you can do fine by yourself.

Isn't it interesting that in Genesis 2:18-25, Adam had to be told he had a need? God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (verse 18). And even after that authoritative statement, Adam still had to name a few million creatures before he realized that none of them were what he needed. His need was for someone. He needed her.

Don't wait to be told what you already know to be true. You need her. You need him. Say it frequently and specifically.

DISCUSS

What keeps you from easily and openly admitting how much you need your spouse? Turn to your spouse and say, "I need you." Then share why and how you need him or her.

PRAY

Ask God to give you a true perspective on your own limitations—your own dependence on Him and on each other.

February 26

NEED BY EXAMPLE

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. Ecclesiastes 4:9

I shared with you yesterday about three little words that aren't always so easy to say: "I need you." But sometimes, all it takes to get those words flowing again is just a reminder of how many ways you truly do depend upon each other.

You need your spouse for:

- Honesty—Who else knows you so well and can give you such an honest perspective on things when you need it most?
- Variety—How black-and-white and one-dimensional would your life be without someone to add color and texture to it?
- Encouragement—Who still believes in you when others don't—including yourself? Who helps you remember your uniqueness and significance?
- Togetherness—Who else can multiply your joys, divide your sorrows and add to your experience with God by sharing it together?
- Counterbalance—When you're going too fast, who helps you put on the brakes? When you're afraid to take a risk, who encourages you to go for it?
- Understanding—When you don't want to talk, who can draw you out? Who else can force you to be real and authentic with your emotions?
- Parenting—How could you raise your children without someone to temper your weaknesses, complement your blind spots and help reinforce your positions?
- Romance—Who else can share your most intimate secrets, see you at your most vulnerable, yet allow you to express yourself without shame, with pure joy in return?
- Companionship—Who is the difference between doing things single-handedly and doing them together, as a couple?

You really do need each other. And God knew what He was doing when He gave you to one another.

DISCUSS

Make your own list of the ways you need each other, or prioritize the top five from the list above. Then be sure to share your list with each other.

PRAY

Thank God for giving you someone to experience life with—someone you need probably more than you know.

February 27

STOP AND LISTEN

Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. James 1:19

A group of carpenters building an icehouse in the north country of Canada was taking a lunch break when a boy came upon them and heard their conversation.

One was bemoaning a watch he had lost at some point in the morning's work.

Though he'd looked for it for a couple of hours, he hadn't been able to find it.

"Would you mind if I went into the ice house and looked?" the boy asked.

"Yeah, sure," the men laughed, certain he'd never find anything in a dark room with no electricity.

Within 30 seconds, the boy emerged holding the watch in his hand. The carpenters couldn't believe it! "How did you find it?"

"It was simple," the boy said. "I just stopped in the middle of the room, stood still and listened for ticking."

Many of us (especially us men) are rightly accused of not listening very well.

We rarely stop and take time to focus our attention—to really hear—what our spouse is trying to tell us. Instead, we quickly say things like, "That's dumb, honey. You shouldn't feel that way. You're blowing this all out of proportion."

Those are statements that come from not really seeking to listen and understand where our wife or husband is coming from.

During serious conversations or conflicts, you need to stop and listen, ask questions or paraphrase what your spouse is saying in order to understand what he or she really means. Asking a good question can often be like an emotional crowbar to dislodge how somebody really feels.

Listening is another way of saying, "You're important to me, and I love you."

DISCUSS

The person who says, "You're not listening to me," is usually right. How often are these words spoken between you? What is one habit you can change to become a better listener?

PRAY

Thank God for always being there to listen to us, no matter how illogical or reactionary we may sometimes be. Ask for His counsel in how to be more like Him. And pray for yourself that you will be a better listener to your partner.

February 28

THE POWER OF WORDS

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification.

Ephesians 4:29

Kids today take “keyboarding” rather than typing, but when I was young, we learned to type on actual typewriters. In high school I struggled in my typing class, but I made a great discovery: If I could type 60 words a minute, even with 15 errors, I would get an A in speed and an F in accuracy. Round those together, and that would give me a C for the class. I could live with that.

But my gray-haired typing teacher, Mrs. Whittington, didn’t like my logic.

Or my behavior. And one day in front of the whole class—exasperated with me over something I’d done—she pointed her very boney finger at me and said, “Dennis Rainey, you will never amount to anything.”

I’m sure before the day was out, she forgot her comment. But I never forgot it. And when I graduated from college, I drove over to her house and rang her doorbell. When she came to the door, I said (kindly), “Hi, Mrs. Whittington, I’m Dennis Rainey. I wanted you to know that I just graduated from college and am getting ready to go into full-time Christian ministry.”

In other words, “I’m going to amount to something, in spite of what you said.” I’m sure she wondered why in the world I came to her house to tell her that!

Now, should I have done that? Probably not. But words can hurt. They go deep and leave a mark, for good or for bad.

That’s why Paul instructed us to use our words for edification—to build up, to strengthen, to lighten the load of another, to give someone the heart to match the need of the moment. He wasn’t talking about flattery, or false praise, but about speaking words of support and encouragement.

Because when we’re not building each other up, we’re probably tearing each other down.

DISCUSS

Share an example of something encouraging your spouse said to you once that you’ve never forgotten. Talk about how that made you feel.

PRAY

Pray that your hearts will be filled with grace and that grace-filled words will follow.

12TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

3911 South 12th Street in Kalamazoo, Michigan
church 269-353-8133 or pastor cell 269-362-1074

Pastor Thaddeus Stout

WORSHIP SERVICES

Sunday School - classes for all ages 10am

Sunday Worship 11am

Wednesday AWANA. 6pm

Wednesday Evening Adult 6:30pm

visit www.12thstreetbaptist.net for upcoming events

Making a Difference in Kalamazoo and Beyond

Will you accept Christ as your personal Savior today?

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

ROMANS 3:23

There is none righteous no not one.

ROMANS 3:10

*But God demonstrated His love toward us, in that,
while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

ROMANS 5:8

couples daily devotion