

The Real Problem With Your Marriage

I often stand amazed at the enormous number of marriage resources on the market, and it seems like every book I read has that *6 Simple Steps...* feel to it. After reading 5 of these books, I have 30 steps that I have to remember and practice on a daily basis, yet somehow still relate to my spouse like a normal human being and not a science project. It is no wonder to me that so many people feel powerless to fix their marriage and end up more confused and overwhelmed than helped. I believe the problem here is that we're focusing on the wrong things. There are so many external, behavioral things we can do to try and improve our closest relationship – help out around the house, improve our communication skills, plan a date night – but my experience is that those things, while helpful, don't get to the root of the problem. I want to simplify the issue here, because I think there is *one* primary ability that is necessary to build oneness in a marriage, and we won't get it from reading a list of self-help books. For our marriages to grow, we must nurture the ability to care about what is important to our spouse.

By the looks of the shelves at your local Christian bookstore, you might think that the Bible passages on marriage would be littered with practical tips on communication. Not to say that there are none, but the most direct passages on marriage speak more about our attitude than our listening skills. In Ephesians 5, Paul directs wives to “be subject to” their husbands, and husbands to “love” their wives, more specifically to “nourish” and “cherish” them. Notice Paul did not implore them to take turns sharing or repeat back what their spouse had said so they would feel heard. These are not descriptions of behaviors, though behaviors will naturally come from them. These are heart attitudes that are necessary for a marriage to succeed. If we want to develop these kinds of attitudes, I believe there is one skill we need to develop. A hint is found in the Greek word translated “cherish.” It gives the image of a mother holding an infant, comforting and soothing it. You can teach a mother a million different techniques for holding a baby, but if she is unable to feel compassion for the child, it won't make a difference. It is the same with our marriages – if we are unable or unwilling to listen and *care* about what is important to our spouse, all the books and techniques in the world won't save us. We have to put ourselves in the other person's place and imagine what a situation must have felt like from their side. It is amazing how many of the “techniques” come naturally once we feel the compassion that comes from this understanding. We naturally compromise and work to meet the needs of our mate when we finally get how they are hurting. The funny thing is we also see things in ourselves that we didn't see before when we look through another person's eyes. There is no need to overcomplicate it with a 10 step process. The solution is really quite simple. So why do we have such a hard time doing it?

I often tell my clients that good communication isn't hard to *understand*, it is just hard to *do*. The problem with allowing ourselves to see our spouse's perspective and feel their pain

is that deep down we often don't want to, unless of course they will see ours first. And thus, the real problem in our marriages is revealed: our own selfishness. Most of us have no problem feeling compassion for a complete stranger on television or someone we just met. That's because we don't have any stake in their problems. But, when their hurts, needs or concerns interfere with our own, suddenly we develop communication amnesia. You may be thinking I am oversimplifying it, but am I? Think back to when you first met the person you married. Every word she said, every story she told was fascinating. You valued his opinion and even asked for it. Because you were trying to impress that other person, you didn't mind setting your own needs aside. Did you have trouble identifying with her feelings then? Did you have communication issues then? With time and commitment come expectations, and we begin to think a great deal more about getting our own needs met. If you go back to how you listened when the relationship was new, you already know how to make your husband or wife feel loved because you have done it before. The next time that difficult conversation comes up, make a decision to set your needs or desires to the side for a few minutes and try to experience what the world is like from your spouse's perspective. Care as if their hurt was your own. I think you will be amazed at what a skilled communicator you will become.