

WHEN MANY COUPLES BEGIN to rehearse their arguments or their requests for romance, they begin to hear very familiar patterns. The following poem captures the rise and fall of common marital disagreements in the form of a Dr. Seuss book. Note the innocent beginning, rise to desperation, and bewildered conclusion.

My name is Sam;
A good spouse I am.
Simple needs are all I ask.
Not too hard is any task.
Listen, touch me, hold my hand;
Let's go for a walk on the sand.

I would kiss you on the mouth,
But please not outside the house.
Time together, just name the place,
But after everything is in its space.
I've done so much—you know it's true—
How could you doubt that I love you?

It feels like I give more than I receive;
Neglect is all that I can perceive.
Anyone fairly keeping score
Would clearly see that I've done more.
The omitted things that I have asked
Reveal you want this marriage axed.

I do not want to bring this pain.
Why make me ask these things again?
A happy marriage should not depend
On how well I can pretend.

If you cannot be my friend,
We should just call this the end.

I hate you; I love you—
Can both really be true?
Don't leave me; get out of my face—
How can we share this same space?
Things can be so good, so bad;
Our marriage may just drive me mad.

We'll stay together for the kids,
But I refuse to live on the skids.
What's the point? We're both unhappy.
"Happily ever after" now seems so sappy.
If this is what God designed,
Should we really just live resigned?

When I take the time to think it through,
I remember the things I love about you.
Differences that seemed monumental
Suddenly seem much more trivial.
How will we ever be free
To enjoy marriage as God meant it to be?

How will we be able to enjoy the blessings God intended to provide through marriage without becoming consumed by our desire for them? Few marriages fall apart because of evil desires. Few embittered spouses seem crazy for wanting the things that have been neglected. But equally true is the reality that the good desires of well-meaning spouses will not always get along.

- The innocent desires of the introvert and the extrovert will clash even when no one is sinning.
- The desires of a spender and a saver, even when each is within the constraints of wisdom, will often clash.

- A “pleasant evening” will be different for someone who values time together than for someone who values productivity.

In a broken world with limited time and money, not every legitimate desire can be fulfilled. Often fulfilling one person’s desire results in neglecting another person’s. Unfortunately, we tend to quickly forget our blessings and long remember our sufferings. Our unmet desires bark louder than our fulfilled desires cheer.

- We remember a few harsh words better than many pleasant words.
- An omitted “Thank you” can speak louder in our emotions than many spoken expressions of gratitude.
- A well-spoken “Not tonight” can easily feel like “We never will.”

What we can say, with the clarity and pungency of a Dr. Seuss rhyme, is that often our hurts and disappointments may be real (authentic to our experience) but not true (accurately representing the situation). But things we tell ourselves persuasively and repeat to ourselves often become as real to us as “green eggs and ham” even if the result is marital food poisoning.

It may be surprising to many that Jesus’ foundational call to be a disciple addressed this very issue: how do we enjoy the good things God gives to us without becoming consumed by our desire for them (or by their momentary absence, or by their not arriving in our preferred style)?

These good things that God intends to provide through marriage exist at the intersection of conflict and romance. As we consider this essential intersection within married life, we will examine one primary passage: Luke 9:23–24.

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

In the course of this booklet we will go through this passage three times. First, we will walk through the straightforward application of the passage. Second, we will use the key principles of this passage to rewrite how we do conflict. Third, we will allow this passage to reignite romance within our marriages.

The goal is more than to apply principles from Scripture to hard situations. Rather, our goal is to use Scripture as the lens by which we see ourselves, our spouses, our marriages, and our difficult moments of powerful change (for better or worse). As you read, be prepared for how vividly even two verses of Scripture can capture, reframe, and transform the most mundane, the most personal, and the most challenging moments of life.

TAKE ONE: THE SIMPLE MEANING OF THE PASSAGE

This is a painfully simple passage with a profoundly counterintuitive twist at the end. We will briefly look at eight points within these two verses in order to set the stage for “Take Two: Conflict” and “Take Three: Romance.”

“To all . . . If anyone . . .” No one is exempt from this passage. Some passages of Scripture have a relatively narrow primary audience—husbands, wives, children, pastors, workers, singles, and so on. But that is not the case here. Based upon the words “all” and “anyone” there is only one category of people who can be exempt from this teaching: those who willfully reject Christ. Yet, as we will see, even those who choose not to follow Christ cannot escape the relational and emotional dynamics described in this passage.

“Come after . . . follow me”. There is no such thing as a good, married Christian who is a bad spouse. A premise of this booklet is that a good Christ-follower is, by definition, a good spouse-lover. Anyone who is marked by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), addresses her own faults before lovingly confronting others (Matt. 7:3–5), and puts the interest of others ahead of her own (Phil. 2:1–11) will be a great spouse. We must resist the tendency to treat marriage enrichment as if it were unrelated to the character transformation that occurs in basic discipleship.

“Deny himself”. The biggest obstacle to being a great spouse stares at each of us from the mirror every morning. Too often we become distracted and consumed by the things we cannot change and we turn a blind eye to the focal point of God’s primary work in our lives. A great marriage is hard for the same reason that the Christian life is hard: it requires us to deny ourselves and to accept by faith that change is needed and that God offers something better—in terms of quality, quantity, method, and sustainability—than our natural selves would pursue.

“Take up his cross daily”. A good marriage and the Christian life are not only hard; they are work. They are not something that we achieved (past tense verb) but something we surrender to (present tense verb) daily. We do not get to take a break from being a Christian or a good spouse. We need to remind ourselves continually that this work (daily denying self) is done in Christ’s strength, not ours, and that it is his performance and righteousness, not ours, that make us acceptable to God. The defining mark of both a Christian and a good spouse is willingness to learn to enjoy the daily transformation involved in each.

“Life”. This is *the* big question: “Where do you find life?” What gives you life? Who do you turn to in order to get life? We will come back to this question in “Take Two: Conflict”

and “Take Three: Romance.” So pause now and begin to consider your answer.

- Where do you turn for relief after a stressful day?
- On what do you cast your cares when life is hard?
- What is your reward when you’ve done well?
- How do you most frequently complete your “if only . . .” daydreams?

The answer to these questions will be the center of your marital conflict and romance and of your walk with Christ.

“*Save . . . lose*”. Jesus says that most of what we do to control the things that matter most to us winds up making life worse. We are like Wile E. Coyote trying out one Acme product after another to catch the Road Runner. Every time, we get blown up or wind up falling off a cliff in the process. As we continually try to squeeze hope, love, peace, and security out of this life with our “commonsense best practices,” they inevitably slip through our fingers and we end up with pain, fear, despair, and insecurity. The result is that we try harder (become controlling, for example), give up (become neglectful), distract ourselves (overspend), shrink our world (obsess), or find some other way to “save our lives” that hurts our marriages.

“*Lose . . . save*”. This is the essence of faith in the gospel. It is the painful part of giving up nothing to get everything. We must be willing to surrender those things that can only temporarily satisfy (at best) in order to receive eternal satisfaction (God himself). After this exchange we realize two things. First, that “life” (hope, righteousness, security) was the very thing keeping us from God. Second, that we can now enjoy those things we previously tried to squeeze life from because they are now placed in proportion. In hindsight this

is a trade we would label a “no-brainer.” In the moment it is always frightening.

“For my sake”. The gospel is not a gimmick or a game. The gospel is not a set of rules by which we can manipulate God and get him to give us what we really want. If we do not ultimately want God, then we do not get the gospel and will not be able to enjoy anything else (at least not for long). Too often we come to God asking for a loan instead of an inheritance. We’re asking for the right things on the basis of the wrong relationship (as peasants instead of children). When we allow the gospel to transform who we are and why we live, then we will ask for the same kinds of things others ask for (including a good marriage) but for different reasons and with different expectations.

Hopefully you are already beginning to hear echoes of what goes wrong in your marital conflict and of what you want to go right in your marital romance. But let’s transition into our second walk through this passage as we delve into the subject of conflict.

TAKE TWO: CONFLICT REWRITTEN

On our first walk through this passage we went phrase by phrase through Jesus’ teaching. This time we are going to take a narrative approach. The narrative we’ll walk through is that of a typical conflict in your home. We’ll introduce ways to structure and interrupt these typical conflicts with the core lessons in Luke 9:23–24.

To begin this section, start by remembering the last several arguments you’ve had with your spouse. If you’re like the vast majority of couples, you don’t have hundreds of different arguments. You have the same handful of arguments with dozens of different triggers and details.

Make a few notes about these arguments in order to help you read your life into the material that follows.

In order to help you learn this material, I suggest that you imagine one or more of these arguments occurring at your kitchen table, which we'll decorate with various trinkets as we go through this section. In the next section I'll redesign your bedroom. (I openly admit to being one of those "intrusive counselors"!)

Even if you don't actually get a box full of trinkets out on the kitchen table, if you take the imagery seriously, it will help you to visualize how the gospel transforms conflict and will never allow you to see conflict the same way again. Part of our objective is to ruin conflict for you. Too often we are too comfortable with patterns that are too destructive. We need new eyes to see ourselves if we are going to live differently (Ezek. 12:2).

Come to the Table

Start by sitting down at the table. If during an episode of conflict either of you is unable to sit at a table with the other, you do not have a relational problem—you have a personal problem. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and not the product of a relationship. If this describes your behavior, you need to deal with your anger and quit thinking about what your spouse is or is not doing. No "marital exercise" will compensate for a personal character deficiency.

Next, each of you should hold a picture of both of you in your hands—preferably a recent picture with the two of you smiling. Holding this picture represents that you are valuing

the marriage more than whatever issue is being discussed and more than your desires that are impacted by the disagreement.

Then each of you should place objects that represent your most common or significant desires in front of you on the table. Again, most couples fight about the same things over and over again in different situations. These objects represent the things that you want badly enough that you are frequently willing to sin against your spouse in order to attain them.

The list below is meant to help you identify what these driving desires are (if the desires are a new concept for you or are hard for you to put into words) and provides examples of the kinds of objects you might put on the table. For the purposes of this exercise and the next, do not select any of these objects that would be offensive to your spouse. The suggestions are meant only to spark creativity, so please identify things that are very “you.”

If trying to be creative annoys you or stresses you out, then just write the bold text words that represent the things that are most important to you on a piece of paper and put those on the table. But be patient with your spouse, who will likely want to have fun and be “meaningful” with this part of the exercise.

- **Acceptance:** the lyrics to the hymn “Just As I Am,” a list of your insecurities, a picture of receiving a hug on a bad day
- **Respect:** a picture of a mutually trusted leader, glasses (to represent eye contact), a net (to represent trust), a piece of paper saying “I believe in you”
- **Power/Influence:** a megaphone (to represent having a voice), a piece of paper with the words *yes* and *no* written on it, a map (to represent choosing direction)
- **Benefit of Doubt:** a cup with “half full” written on it, a piece of paper saying “I believe you,” a magnifying glass with a broken lens
- **Order/Predictability:** a day planner, a neatly folded towel, an organization flowchart, a GPS

- **Peace:** a picture of a desolate beach, a favorite relaxation object, the word *silence* written on a piece of paper
- **Freedom:** a “Get Out of Jail Free” card, an American flag, something representing your favorite guilty pleasure
- **Hobby:** a golf ball, an empty shotgun shell, a favorite Pinterest project
- **Being Understood:** a personal journal, a comic strip that captures who you are, the phrase “if you don’t understand, ask more questions”
- **Support:** a few Jenga blocks, a “That Was Easy” button from Staples, a toy life preserver
- **Romance/Affection:** a heart-shaped pillow, two gloves placed hand in hand, the word *sex* written on a piece of paper (probably best not to be too creative with what you put on the table for this one)
- **Unity:** two candles (to represent the unity candle part of a wedding ceremony), two strings tied in a knot, an HP and Mac logo on the same piece of paper (I’m dreaming big with this one)
- **Ease/Fun/Comfort:** a television remote, a bookmark, a piece of paper saying “off duty,” a blanket (à la Linus)
- **My Way:** a Frank Sinatra album, an ace of spades (as a trump card), a “One Way” street sign
- **Affirmation/Gratitude:** a thank you card, a drawing of a smile, a list of things you wouldn’t change about your life or marriage
- **Rest:** a pillow, a favorite book, a favorite blend of coffee, an ergonomic wrist pillow
- **Fairness:** a referee whistle, old-fashioned balance scales, an apple and an orange
- **Dream Fulfilled:** if you don’t know what to put here, this is an important conversation to have with yourself and with your spouse
- **Protection:** a hard hat, a shield, a padlock, an antivirus software box

You'll quickly notice something about this list. These are all good things. No reasonable person wants to do without any of them, and no healthy marriage is significantly deficient in these areas. This is what makes our bad actions in conflict feel so justified: most often we are vying for good things.

But before you move on, stop to evaluate whether some of the things you want have become good words with corrupted definitions. Too often *respect* can begin to mean "never being questioned," or *peace* can mean "never being asked to do anything uncomfortable." *Love* can mean "knowing what I'm thinking without my telling you." In these cases good words become wolves in sheep's clothing. We are being manipulative because we are labeling unrealistic expectations with nice words.

The goodness of the desires that lead to most conflicts is one of the most striking observations from James 4:1–2. When James asks, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" his answer is, "Your *passions* are at war within you. . . . You *desire* and do not have. . . . You *covet* and cannot obtain." If you study the words *passions*, *desire*, and *covet* in the original Greek you'll notice that two of the three are neutral (even positive) terms.

James is not rebuking these believers for what they want. He is correcting them for wanting good things so badly that they are willing to devour one another in order to obtain them. Notice this: when we demand the things we want, they become less satisfying and there is less unity when we get them. But James's readers were so blinded by the goodness of what they were pursuing that they wouldn't acknowledge this deterioration (nor will we).

- The more we demand respect, the less we can see or appreciate small acts of honor.
- The more we demand gratitude, the less we can sense common forms of appreciation.
- The more we insist on a particular expression of love, the more blind and deaf we become to other forms of love.

Instead we double down on our increasingly ineffective approach to “saving our lives.” We become sin-blind. We see the world through the lens of the objects on the table. We hear everything our spouses say through the filter of whether it is appeasing the desires of our heart. We forget that we cannot truly have (i.e., enjoy) the things on the table until they no longer have us (i.e., keep us believing that we “need” them).

We realize (or at least we should realize) that these desires have become idols that are reinterpreting everything we experience. In a way we don’t want to admit, we are living, moving, and having our being in our overgrown desires (contra Acts 17:28)—we have become children made in the image of our idolatrous desires instead of the image of our heavenly Father and Creator.

Notice that in these moments our desires begin to play every role that God should play—defining friend and foe, good and bad, what is worth our time and not worth our time, and so on. We “trust and obey” what our idolatrous desires say without question even if it means harming those we love most. We begin to follow our idols naturally, but when Christ calls us to follow him in the same way, we find it uncomfortable.

Pause for a moment and hear Luke 14:26 in light of this reality. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” We cringe when we hear Jesus say this, but we blindly follow our desires into destructive conflict when they ask the same. But Jesus can be trusted in a way that our desires cannot.

This is what we must see if we are going to rescue our marital conflicts from becoming something that poisons our covenant with mistrust, scorekeeping, and bitterness. This will be a challenging process of denying ourselves and trusting that if we lose our lives (the objects on the table) we will actually save them (have something better). So let’s see what comes next in the process.