

## ***TAKING CARE OF YOUR MARRIAGE***

**Take Care – Week 6**

**By Andy Manning**

**March 31, 2019**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the last part in our sermon series “Take Care,” which is all about taking care of yourself, so that you have the strength to take care of others. The title of this sermon is “Taking Care of Your Marriage.”

**Pastor Tommy Nelson** said, “Only dead couples don’t have conflict.”

**Another person** said, “If you and your spouse never disagree, then one of you isn’t necessary.”

What is conflict? The existence in a relationship of a disagreement, frustration, or hurt feelings.

In the New Testament, Paul repeatedly encouraged the different churches to forgive, to get along, to pursue peace, to be patient, to strive for unity and harmony. Why? Because he knew that conflict was inevitable.

When two people spend a lot of time together, eventually they will have conflict. They will experience disagreement, frustration, or hurt feelings. It follows that in marriage there will be plenty of conflict.

There are five major areas of conflict: Money, sex, kids, in-laws, and schedule. And then if you marry someone who is not a Christian, or who is on the opposite side of the aisle politically, then add those to the list.

You’ve heard the old saying, “Opposites attract.” That’s fine, but just realize that after marriage opposites attack. Eventually all those differences that you thought were interesting and cute will become very annoying.

If you don’t know how to handle conflict, then it can destroy your marriage. Many marriages are destroyed because they don’t know how to handle conflict.

They don't know how to work through disagreements, and frustrations, and hurt feelings.

**I heard it said** that “there's only one thing worse than being single and wishing you were married, and that's being married and wishing you were single.” That's how many married people feel. If you don't learn how to handle conflict in your marriage, then eventually you will grow to despise each other.

## **THE WRONG WAY TO HANDLE CONFLICT**

Some people think the best way to handle conflict is **AVOIDANCE**. They've tried going through the tunnel of conflict, and they came out all beat up. So now they are trying a different approach – avoidance. But avoidance is very ineffective way to handle conflict in marriage.

The problem with buried anger is that it always resurrects. If you bury your hurt feelings, disagreements, and frustrations, they will come back to life.

**Rick Warren** said, “The longer you wait to resolve a relationship problem the bigger it gets... An unresolved conflict is like termites in your relationship. If you don't deal with an issue eventually it will bring the house down.” Avoidance is not the answer.

**Dennis Rainey** said, “Conflict often starts with something small, even inconsequential. As someone said, people who claim that small things don't bother them never slept in a room with a mosquito. The little things, left unresolved, can rob a marriage of romance and result in bitterness, anger, and loneliness.”

**Dr. Gary Smalley** said, “The biggest killer of love is unresolved conflict.”

Other people think the best way to handle conflict is **APPEASEMENT**. One person in the relationships just always gives in. “Fine. Whatever. I don't care anymore. I just don't want to fight.”

**Rick Warren** said, “Peacemaking is not appeasing another person for the sake of peace. In other words, I always give in to your ways, have it your way, do it your

way. I'm manipulated, I'm dominated by you. God doesn't expect you to be a doormat.... The result of appeasement is always resentment. It builds up in yourself. When I swallow my feelings, my stomach keeps score.... Peace at any price is not legitimate peace.”

Another way to handle conflict is **AGGRESSION**. They attack. They scream, and holler, and manipulate, and insult, and criticize, and nag, and stonewall, and give the cold shoulder. Of course this doesn't work. This only drives you apart.

The reason that a couple falls in love is because at some point they made each other feel so good emotionally that they became irresistible to each other. That's what it means to be in love. You find each other irresistible. How do you get to that level? You consistently make each other feel good emotionally? Well, what happens when you handle conflict with aggression? You stop making each other feel good and you start making each other feel bad. And eventually you will fall out of love, and even grow to hate each other.

**John Powell** wrote a book called *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am*, and he described the five levels or STAGES OF COMMUNICATION.<sup>1</sup>

Level Five: Cliché. Elevator talk. “Hello, how are you doing? Nice weather today. Bye.”

Level Four: Fact. Just the facts. Reporting the facts. Share what you know but nothing more.

Level Three: Opinion. Sharing your opinion – your ideas and judgments about things. You are starting to open up at this point and reveal a little bit of who you are.

Level Two: Emotions. Sharing how you feel. How you feel about the marriage. About life. About problems. Sharing how you feel doesn't mean saying hurtful things to your spouse. “I'm telling you how I feel. I feel like you're an idiot.” That's not going to fly.

Level One: Transparency. Sharing the real you, from the heart.

The best, most fulfilling marriages live at Level One. Transparency. They are so close. So intimate. And that's the kind of marriage we all long for. But it is impossible to get to Level One, and to live at Level One, if you handle conflict with avoidance, or appeasement, or aggression. You have to learn how to handle conflict Biblically.

Conflict does not have to drive you apart. In fact, conflict can make your marriage stronger. **Rick Warren** said, "The key to intimacy is conflict." Why? Because when you address the conflict and resolve it then you understand each other better. And greater understanding of leads to greater intimacy.

**Dennis Rainey** said, "Conflict can lead to a process that develops oneness or isolation. Each couple must decide which it will be." Conflict isn't the problem. Conflict is necessary for intimacy. The problem is how we deal with conflict.

**Pastor Tommy Nelson** said, "The difference between a good couple and a bad couple is one fights clean and one fights dirty." Today I want to talk to you about how to fight clean. How to fight fair. How to handle conflict in the most constructive way.

## **EIGHT RULES FOR FIGHTING FAIR IN MARRIAGE**

### **ONE: GUARD YOUR TONGUE.**

So many problems in marriage can be avoided if you would just learn to guard your tongue.

**Proverbs 18:21** "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit." Your tongue can either give life to your marriage, or destroy your marriage.

**Psalms 34:13** "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech."

To fight fair, you there are **SIX KINDS OF EVIL SPEECH TO AVOID.**

**One: Don't cut each other off.** Don't interrupt. Let the other person talk; and let them completely finish their train of thought before you start talking.

A person who cuts people off is called a steamroller. Don't do that.

Do you know why God gave you two ears and one mouth? He wants you to listen twice as much as you talk.

God created two natural barriers to control the tongue. The teeth and the lips. Use them. Don't interrupt each other.

What if the other person says something that is completely wrong, or completely false, or something that really annoys you? Still don't interrupt.

When you cut someone off, you are communicating to them that your words are more important than theirs. That's offensive.

When you cut someone off, you invite them to cut you off. Eventually you will stop listening to each other altogether and just start talking over each other, getting louder and louder until you are shouting.

**James 1:19** "My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

**Two: Don't insult one another.** When you are going through the tunnel of conflict, you will be very tempted to throw out insults. Name-calling. Put-downs.

And criticizing your spouse's character. "You are lazy. You are selfish. You are a liar. You are a loser." Instead, it's better to say, "You were acting lazy. You are being self. You lied." You can point out their offensive behavior without attacking their character.

Try to make your marriage an edification-only zone. The word edification means to build up; to help. **Ephesians 4:29** "No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need [edification], so that it gives grace to those who hear."

I like how the **Expanded Bible** version puts it. "Don't say anything that will hurt others [L let any rotten/unhealthy word come from your mouth], but only say

what is ·helpful [good] to ·make others stronger [build others up] ·and meet [L according to] their needs. Then what you say will ·do good [give grace; be a gift] to those who listen to you.”

**Rick Warren** said, “You don’t get your point across by being cross.”

**Three: Don’t raise your voice.** One reason couples yell and scream is because they cut each other off. The second reason is because they lose their tempers. So if you want to avoid raising your voice, don’t cut each other off, and control your temper.

There’s no reason to raise your voice, unless your spouse is hard of hearing.

Raising your voice is offensive.

Raising your voice will not change your spouse. “Maybe if I yell at her enough she’ll love me.” That’s not how it works.

**Ephesians 4:31** “Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice.”

**Rick Warren** said, “You’re never persuasive when you’re abrasive.”

**Four: Avoid absolutes.**

“You’re always late. You’ve never cared about me. You’re always rude.”

Absolutes are very offensive because they exaggerate your spouse’s faults.

And they distract from the issue. Instead of discussion your spouse’s chronic lateness, you’re arguing about whether or not they are “always” late. The point is not that they are always late, or even mostly late, but that they are late often enough to bother you. That’s where you need to focus. But absolutes will distract from the main issue.

**Ephesians 4:15 (GNT)** "By speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we grow up in every way to Christ."

Absolutes are bad because they are neither true nor loving.

**Rick Warren** said, “If you say something offensively, it will be received defensively.”

To effectively handle conflict, it’s important to not just focus on what you say, but on how you say it.

### **Five: Avoid insulting (rude) body language.**

What are some examples of insulting body language?

Not looking at your spouse when they are speaking. That shows that you are not interested in what they have to say.

Rolling your eyes.

Mean facial expressions.

Why is your body language so important? Studies show that only seven percent of communication is verbal. 38 percent is your tone of voice. That’s why you shouldn’t raise your voice. And 55 percent is body language.

**1 Corinthians 13:4-5** says, “Love... is not rude.” That’s what insulting body language is. Rudeness.

The **old saying** says, “You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.” When you are in the tunnel of conflict, make sure your body language is sweet and not sour.

### **Six: Avoid the D-word.**

What is the D-word? Divorce.

When people get really angry with their spouse, they use the D-word to threaten or to hurt.

They threaten with the D-word by saying things like, “If you don’t change, I’m getting a divorce.”

And they hurt with the D-word by saying things like, “I wish we could get a divorce. If it weren’t for the kids, I’d file for divorce.”

But if you are truly committed to Christ, then divorce is not an option.

**Matthew 19:6** “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

It is best in marriage if you just make a simple rule not to use the D-word. It is off-limits. Out of bounds. When we fight, we will not use the D-word.

So the first rule for fighting fair in marriage is to guard your tongue. And if you do that, you’ve won half the battle.

## **TWO: AVOID JUDGMENTALISM.**

**Matthew 7:1** “Do not judge, so that you won’t be judged.”

Contrary to public opinion, judgmentalism is not the same as condemnation, or stating that a person’s behavior is sinful. If that were the case then every parent would be guilty of judgmentalism every time they rebuke their children for misbehavior.

In fact, if judgmentalism is condemnation, or stating that a person’s behavior is sinful, then the person who says “it’s wrong to judge” is guilty of judgmentalism.

When you say that a certain behavior is sinful, such as adultery, or homosexuality, or abortion, you are not actually judging, but stating what the Judge has already declared. You are simply repeating God’s law. It’s like telling someone the speed limit. You are not judging them; you are simply stating the law.

To judge someone is to play the part of God.



So one form of judgmentalism is condemning someone's motives and heart. "You said that just to hurt me. You did that just to hurt me. You don't care about me. You did that on purpose. You meant to do that. You knew that that would upset me and you did it anyway."

What's wrong with these statements? There's no way that you can know if they are true. You are assuming that you know a person's heart, and motives, and intentions, but only God knows that.

Some of you have played the role-playing game called Mafia with us at our house. Every one in the game assumes a secret identity. One or two people are the mafia, and everyone else are townspeople, and the goal is to figure out who the mafia are. After you play mafia you start to realize how hard it is to truly read someone's mind.

There's no point in trying to figure out if your spouse meant to do it; or what their motives or intentions are. So it is best to focus on their visible behavior rather than their invisible heart. Instead of saying, "You meant to do that," say, "Whether you meant to do that or not, it hurt me; it annoyed me."

### **THREE: DON'T CRITICIZE YOUR SPOUSE'S FEELINGS.**

Let's say that you like vanilla ice cream, and your spouse likes chocolate. How smart would it be to get into a fight about which flavor is better? It would be really dumb. Why? Because you are talking about something that is subjective. Neither flavor is objectively better, because it depends on the individual.

It's also dumb when you criticize or argue with your spouse about their feelings.

Let's say that your wife says that she feels very jealous and insecure when you act a certain way. Don't say that she is ridiculous for feeling that way. Don't argue with her and say that she shouldn't feel that way. The bottom line is that she feels that way. So the way to work through that is to find out what is causing her to feel that way, and then do whatever you can to help her feel better.

Or let's say that your husband says that he doesn't feel loved by you. Rather than criticizing him for feeling that way, or arguing that he is wrong to feel that way,

find out why he feels that way, and then find out what you can do to help him feel loved again.

This applies to simple things, too. It really bothers me when Lydia chews ice. I can't stand the sound, and I don't like that it is bad for her teeth (her teeth are important to me). When I told Lydia, she could have criticized me and said I was stupid for feeling that way. Or she could have said I was being selfish for asking her to stop chewing ice. Or she could have argued with me about how chewing ice shouldn't bother me. But instead, she listened to me, and tried to understand why I felt that way, and then she stopped chewing ice.

On the flip side, one time Lydia told me that it really bothered her when I didn't push my sock drawer in all the way. If I left it halfway hanging out, it bothered her. I could have argued with her about it, or criticized her about it, but that wouldn't have gotten us anywhere. So instead, I started pushing my drawer all the way in.

**James 4:11 (GNT)** "Do not criticize one another...." Don't criticize your spouse's feelings.

#### **FOUR: DON'T BLAME YOUR BAD BEHAVIOR ON YOUR SPOUSE.**

To successfully handle conflict, you can't play the blame game.

When your spouse confronts you about something you did, don't blame them for your bad behavior.

What's the old saying? Two wrongs don't make a right.

People have been playing the blame game since the very beginning.

When God confronted Adam about eating the forbidden fruit, he blamed it on Eve. Then Eve blamed it on the devil.

When Moses confronted Aaron about the Gold Calf that he made for the Israelites, he blamed it on the Israelites, and then he blamed it on magic. He said he just threw their gold jewelry into the fire and out came the gold calf.

This happens in marriage all the time. “You didn’t talk to me before you bought that new grill.” “That’s because you didn’t talk to me when you bought those new shoes.”

“It makes me angry when you are late for dinner.” “Every time I get home on time, dinner isn’t ready anyway.”

Your spouse’s sin is not justification for your sin. And you’re never going to get through the tunnel of conflict if you just blame your spouse.

**Galatians 6:5 (GW)** “Assume your own responsibility.”

Your spouse may be just as wrong as you, but that doesn’t give you an excuse to keep sinning.

When your sins are pointed out, you need to accept responsibility and repent.

**Rick Warren** said, “You've got to stop fixing the blame in order to start fixing the problem.”

#### **FIVE: RESIST THE URGE TO GET DEFENSIVE.**

Defensiveness occurs when your spouse confronts you, and instead of humbling yourself you attack them.

“Honey, it frustrates me when you leave your laundry lying on the floor.” “Look who’s talking. It frustrates me when you wear that nightgown.”

“Honey, it hurts my feelings when make fun of me in public.” “Oh you’re such a Debbie-downer. Anytime I try to have fun you want to stop me.”

There’s a story about defensiveness in the Bible. John the Baptist preached against Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. Instead of humbling himself and repenting, Herod arrested John and then had him beheaded.

That's what we do in marriage so often. Our spouse points out our sin, or some behavior that bothers them, and we cut their head off. That's not going to work in marriage.

Instead of attacking your spouse, you need to humble yourself and admit your sin and repent.

**1 Peter 5:5** "All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."

### **SIX: DON'T JUSTIFY YOUR BEHAVIOR WITH GOOD INTENTIONS.**

One of the biggest mistakes that married couples make when dealing with conflict is that the accused party tries to justify his behavior with his good intentions.

When Saul disobeyed God by failing to completely destroy the Amalekites, he said the reason why he spared all of the livestock was because he wanted to offer sacrifices to God. But regardless of Saul's intentions, he was disobedient.

So here's how this plays out in marriage. The husband says, "Honey, you hurt my feelings." The wife replies, "I didn't mean to." It doesn't matter if you meant to. You hurt his feelings.

The wife says, "Baby, that really bothers me." The husband replies, "I'm not trying to bother you." It doesn't matter. Your behavior bothers your wife.

See, your behavior may not be sinful, and your intentions may be good, but if your behavior bothers your spouse, then you've got a problem. At this point your spouse isn't concerned with your intentions. They are concerned with your behavior.

For example, let's say I told Lydia that it really bothers me when she chews ice, and she replied, "I'm not trying to bother you." Does that solve the problem? No. Whether she means it or not, her chewing ice bothers me, and so that's what we need to focus on.

### **SEVEN: LEAVE THE PAST IN THE PAST.**

One man said, “My wife gets mad at me and becomes historical.” That’s what happens in so many marriage fights. We start out talking about not leaving laundry on the floor, and the next thing you know we’re fighting about all the things that we’ve fought about in the history of our marriage.

Remember what the Bible says about love. **1 Corinthians 13:4-5** “Love... does not keep a record of wrongs.”

Once you’ve dealt with an issue, once you’ve forgiven a sin, then leave it in the past.

Today is challenging enough without bringing up all of the challenges of the past.

#### **EIGHT: AGREE TO AGREE.**

This last rule for fighting fair just might be the game-changer for some of you.

When you experience conflict, agree to agree.

**Dr. Willard Harley** calls this the Policy of Enthusiastic Agreement: “Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse.”

**He goes on,** “Always resolve conflicts with a win-win.”

Here’s another way to put it. Don’t do something, or pursue a course of action, if your spouse is really against it. That’s just begging for trouble.

**Dr. Willard Harley** said, “The Policy of Joint Agreement encourages couples to consider each other's happiness as equally important. They are a team and both should try to help each other and avoid hurting each other. It just makes good sense. Why should one spouse consider their own interests so important that he or she can run roughshod over the interests of the other? It's a formula for marital disaster, and yet some of the most well-intentioned couples do it from their honeymoon on.”

I first learned the principle from Dr. Willard Harley, but I later saw it in the writings of Dr. Gary Smalley, probably the most popular Christian marriage counselor in America. He said that he and his wife were in the middle of a fight, and he stopped and asked her to try an experiment with her. **He said**, "Will you not make decisions in the home that affect me and the rest of the family without my complete agreement? And I won't make any decisions affecting you unless I have your full consent." What was the result? **He said**, "Committing ourselves to agree has brought more harmony and deeper communication than anything else we practice. It has increased my wife's self-worth and eliminated pressure-packed arguments."

You might ask, "Is that even biblical?" Yes it is.

In Ephesians 5, before Paul writes about wives submitting to their husbands, he says this. **Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)** "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

This doesn't mean that the husband isn't the head, the leader of the home, but it means that there is a need for mutual submission. Sometimes it is called submitting to oneness. God has called you to live in oneness with your spouse – in intimacy and harmony and peace and unity. When you agree to agree, you are not submitting to one another so much as you are submitting to God's command to be one with each other.

**Andy Stanley** said, "Marriage is a submission competition."

**Romans 12:18 (GN)** "Do everything possible, on your part, to live at peace with all men."

That's what it means to agree to agree. You are doing everything possible to live at peace with your spouse.

**James 3:17 (LB)** "...Wisdom ... is peace-loving and courteous. It allows discussion and is willing to yield to others; it is full of mercy and good deeds. It is wholehearted and straightforward and sincere."

**Rick Warren** said, “More marriages die from inflexibility than from adultery or abuse, alcohol or anything else. They are just unwilling to change, unwilling to move, to budge. If you are wise, you’ll compromise.”

Remember, marriage is not a dictatorship; it is a partnership.

So the next time you are having conflict in your marriage, remember the Policy of Joint Agreement: “Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The world has the wrong idea of marriage. According to the world, dating is great, engagement is great, living together is great, the honeymoon is great, but marriage is a drag. Once you get married the romance evaporates and you live like roommates for the rest of your lives together.

But that’s not God’s view of marriage. A Christian marriage should get sweeter and sweeter with each passing year. And it can, but you have to fight fair. You have to handle conflict in a Biblical manner.

---

<sup>i</sup> I learned about the five stages of communication from Dennis Rainey’s book, *Starting Your Marriage Right*, pp. 27-28.