

## 10 Internal Conflicts

In the previous chapter we have discussed conflicts that intrude into a marriage from the outside. We now want to look at conflicts that arise within the marriage. Marital conflicts are common in every marriage, because both spouses are different individuals with very different backgrounds, feelings, and expectations. They range from simple disagreements about unimportant things to serious problems that are caused by sinful behavior of one spouse. Common examples are

- Sin of one spouse
- Immaturity or brokenness of one person
- Hurt feelings that are no one's fault
- Conflicting desires
- Individual desires versus the needs of the relationship
- Hidden faults

The rules for dealing with such conflicts depend on the nature of the conflict. When you come home late without calling, for instance, you owe your spouse a sincere apology (not a lame excuse). When you can't agree on where to go to dinner, no one should behave as if the other had committed the unpardonable sin.

Yet often we see that a couple argues about minor things forever instead of resolving the conflict. They feel that every conflict has only a right and a wrong. And since each spouse doesn't want to be the one who is wrong, they try to prove to the other that he is wrong. Quite often, they dig out old incidents to prove their point and after a while both partners are very hurt and angry. And this only because one wanted to spend the evening at home and the other wanted to go out for dinner. There is no right and wrong in such a conflict.

In the following we want to look at some common forms of marital conflicts and proper ways to address them. Distinguishing what kind of conflict we are in will equip us better to find a solution that is acceptable for both partners and the relationship as well.

### 10.1 Sin of one spouse

The conflict scenario is relatively simple if someone has done something wrong. One spouse has sinned against the other – not in imaginary ways but in an obvious way. There is no shortage of areas in which we can sin against each other. The Bible warns us about a variety of sins that we should stay away from.

Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language

from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. **(Colossians 3:5,8–9)**

The acts of the sinful nature are plain: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**(Galatians 5:19–21)**

In a marriage relationship, our sinful nature is often revealed by one the following:

Angry outbursts, name calling, impatience, a critical attitude, judgmentalism, controlling behavior, misuse of power, belittling, other emotionally injurious behavior, pride, selfishness, jealousy, envy, conceit, lying, deception, out-of-control spending of family money (which is thievery), greed, substance abuse, and sexual sin.

What can we do when our spouse sins against us? Shall we demonstrate our love to by ignoring the sin? Isn't that what keeps a Christian marriage alive?

Not quite. Although we should definitely have a loving attitude in all that we do, the Bible is very clear about how to deal with sin.

He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue **(Proverbs 28:23)**.

Rebuke your neighbor frankly, so you will have no share in his guilt. **(Leviticus 19:17b)**.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. **(Matthew 18:15a)**.

There is no way out. Sin must be confronted to bring the sinner back on track. But when we confront sin, we have to make sure that our motives are pure and that our attitude is one of compassion. We all know, that we fall short of the glory of God. While this must not be taken as reason to remain silent about the sin, it makes clear that there should be no feeling of superiority when we point out sin to our spouse – even if the sin is as serious as an addiction. Otherwise we become guilty of judgmentalism ourselves.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you **(Ephesians 4:32)**.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven **(Luke 6:37)**.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently **(Galatians 6:1)**

When we talked about the value of love for your spouse (Section 8.3), we pointed out the importance of empathy: identifying with your spouse's feelings and wanting the best for our spouse. We do not want to lord it over our spouse and at the same time we should not minimize the sin. We should love the sinner and be tough on the sin. Some people find this very difficult. But there is a simple guideline that we can follow when confronting sin in our spouse.

1. *Look at your own attitude.* Make sure that you get rid of all judgmentalism, condemnation, and pride before you rebuke your spouse.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "let me take the speck out of your eye", when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother's eye (**Matthew 7:3–5**).

You cannot wait until you are sinless before you confront sin in your spouse. But you can rid yourself of the kind of sin that prevents you from seeing clearly enough.

2. *Make sure that it is really sin what you want to address.* Quite often the things that bother us are different behaviors, conflicting desires, and annoying habits of our spouse. Although these things may greatly disturb us, they are not sins and should not be treated as such. It is not helpful to accuse your spouse of sinning against you, just because he does things that you don't like. These issues have to be dealt with differently.

When in doubt, consult the scriptures. The Bible is very clear about what is sin and what is not and using scripture when talking about the issue certainly helps making your points clear to your spouse.

3. *Speak to the issue directly.* The biggest mistake that people make when confronting a sin in their partner is to launch a global attack on all of his failings. If you want to win him over, you must talk about the specific sin, and only about that one.

Tell him that what he is doing is not right. If the sin was not against you, this should be all. Otherwise, you should also let him know how you feel, how his sin affects you and the kind of hurt it creates. Use "I"-statements. There is no point in telling him that he is the most insensitive person on this planet or that he hurts you on purpose. Character assaults lead nowhere and will only make him defensive. What is really important here is that he understands the pain you feel because of what he did.

4. *Offer forgiveness.* If you followed the above advice, there is a good chance that your spouse will acknowledge his sin and apologize. Accept the apology, forgive him, and reaffirm your love and acceptance.
5. *Offer support to solve underlying issues.* Often, there is a deeper problem that led to the sin you confronted. When the emotions are not strong, talk about what happened so see if further help is needed, even though he repented. Offer you support and help to solve the problem. If necessary, seek outside help together.
6. *Agree on a follow-up plan.* What shall be done if the sin re-occurs? How can you help your spouse in this case? You should work together to deal with the problem. Again, in some cases it may be better to bring additional resources to the problem, such as friends who hold him accountable as well. The issue is not to police him, but to become a team that fights the re-occurrence together.

## 10.2 Immaturity or brokenness of one spouse

All of us fall short of the demands of life in some or the other way. This is quite normal and in most marriages both spouses have found ways for dealing with the shortcomings of their partners. The situation is more difficult, however, if one spouse seems to be unable to deal with a normal daily load and the other has a hard time accepting her weakness.

For instance, a housewife may not be able to complete the normal chores of housework during the daytime and her husband has to do these things after he comes home from work if he wants some form of order in the house. Or a husband may have trouble controlling his spending habits and thus ruins his wife's attempts to manage the tight family budget.

These are difficult situations and the "victim" might easily get upset about his spouse's apparent lack of responsibility. After all, he is the one who has to suffer the consequences. However, nagging only makes the problem worse, since the real issue is not an unwillingness of his spouse but an inability to do certain things right. Most people are totally unaware of these shortcomings of their spouse when they marry. In fact, this is what "being in love" is about: you idealize the other person and realize where he or she falls short of that ideal – even if the shortcomings are very obvious to others. Being in love makes you blind for such things.

But eventually, reality will surface, and both of you need to face the conflict that arises from it. Here are a few helpful ways to do so.

1. *Accept reality.* Both of you have promised to unconditionally accept your spouse – no matter what life will bring. And over the years you will discover, that both you and your mate have certain weaknesses. Your spouse may have

- (a) a lack of structure and self-discipline
- (b) inability to manage finances or to make money in the first place.
- (c) not yet grown into a mature adult (see Section 7)
- (d) not completely left home, still clinging too strongly to his family of origin
- (e) difficulties to get close, sustain intimacy, or communicate emotions
- (f) emotional problems due to past experiences, particularly in the family of origin
- (g) sexual difficulties resulting from fear, traumatic events, shame, or other emotional factors
- (h) depressions resulting from various health issues, such as thyroid or hormone problems

None of these weaknesses are “sins”, even if their effects may really bother you. Your spouse is immature in some areas and needs to grow. But that is how she is right now. Even if “every normal person on the face of the earth” can do what your spouse cannot do, you have to accept the current reality without condemning her for what she is right now.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven (**Luke 6:37**).

Love is patient and kind; . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (**1. Corinthians 13:4,7**)

Expecting your spouse to be the ideal partner is unrealistic and only prolongs the problem. Accepting reality helps focusing on a solution instead of the problem.

2. *Communicate your support to your spouse.* Growing out of immaturities is difficult if we have to do this in an environment where we are judged, nagged, condemned, or resented. We need to feel that our spouse is on our side and supports us.

Your spouse feels the same way, so if you want her to grow, you need to let her know that you are her biggest supporter. Make sure that she understands that you love and accept her just the way she is, and that you will be patient with her as she tries to address her weakness or inability and support her in every way you can.

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (**1. Thessalonians 5:14**).

3. *Face issues as real problems.* Unconditional acceptance does not mean that you should ignore the problem. Part of love, as discussed in Section 8, is honesty and requiring your spouse to strive for growth and a holy life. You can't let her remain ignorant of her immaturities.

Love does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

**(1. Corinthians 13:6)**

Honesty is not easy, but the most successful approach is being direct but free of shame and condemnation. Assure her of your love, tell her that you understand her difficulties, but let you know how *you* are affected by her immaturities and that you wish things differently. If she understands that you suffer the effects of her inabilities but do not blame her for that, she will feel motivated to address the problem.

4. *Own your problems.* Some people have difficulties accepting that they are doing things that cause pain to their spouse. They react defensively when being confronted with their own weaknesses, blame their spouse for their problem, or claim that their behavior is perfectly normal and that their spouse is totally unrealistic. While some of that may even be true to some degree, a defensive reaction does not help at all.

Be wise, listen to feedback, and try to understand what the person who sees you every day has been learning about you. You may not be aware of the things that are obvious to the outside. Don't fight the truth but welcome correction, even if it is uncomfortable. And once you understand the problem, own it. It is your weakness, and only you can overcome it. Your spouse cannot do that for you – all he can do is help you.

He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray. **(Proverbs 10:17).**

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. **(Proverbs 12:1).**

There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way; he who hates reproof will die. **(Proverbs 15:10).**

He who ignores instruction despises himself, but he who heeds admonition gains understanding. **(Proverbs 15:32).**

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool **(Proverbs 17:10).**

5. *Get a plan.* Once the problem has become clear to both partners, it is time to find ways to address it. Make a plan. Decide what is needed to solve the problem and what can be done to follow through with the solution. You may need help from others, maybe therapy, or counseling. You may need to see a doctor. You may have to develop an accountability system. Make sure that the problem does not rule your family but that that you *overcome* it by being serious about dealing with it. Devote time, resources, and energy to solving the problem. You may have to reorganize a part of your life to do so, but it is certainly worth it.

6. *Make it mutual.* One of the greatest dangers of dealing with immaturity and brokenness of one spouse is labeling one person as “the problem” and the other as the one who is o.k. Just because one person’s immaturity is more obvious, this does not mean that she is the only one who needs to grow in the relationship. Neither of you is perfect yet, no one is superior or inferior – in God’s eyes you are both equal, and you should view each other the same way.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made (**Psalm 139:14**).

Usually, both spouses complement each other better than they might realize. Where one is weak, the other one is strong. This may not be so easy to realize if one spouse’s weaknesses are more obvious or if taking care of her weaknesses absorbs all the energy that both of you have. Often, one partner has to grow more in the *relational* area, such as expressing feelings and confronting problems, and the other in the *functional* area of life, such as getting things done or managing time, finances, and other resources.

You need to help *each other* in these areas of weakness. Remember, the two of you have become one, so if one part suffers, so does the other – just in a different way.

So ought men also to love their own wives as their own bodies: he that loves his own wife loves himself. For no one has ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as also the Christ the assembly: for we are members of his body; we are of his flesh, and of his bones. Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be united to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak as to Christ, and as to the assembly. But ye also, every one of you, let each so love his own wife as himself; but as to the wife I speak that she may fear the husband. (**Ephesians 5:28–33**).

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (**1. Corinthians 12:26**).

You are no longer individuals in the way singles are. Both of you are in need of growth but you can join forces to address the problems that are in your way. As a team you will do much better than if you try alone.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. (**Ecclesiastes 4:9-10**)

Don’t just focus on the problems of one spouse and neglect the other’s need to grow, just because his problems are not as apparent. Make helping the other mutual: confront each other in an honest and loving way, support each other, and grow together.

### 10.3 Hurt feelings that are no one's fault

Occasionally, a couple runs into the situation that one spouse feels hurt because she is disappointed about something that just happened. She hoped for a romantic evening, but her husband gets called away for an emergency. She wanted to buy these long overdue decorations for the house but all the money they saved has to be used to pay for a medical bill. The long-planned vacations have to be canceled because he got sick. She desires to live in a nicer and not so tiny house but the family simply cannot afford to buy a new one. She may be plagued by a disease and there is little her husband can do about it.

There are plenty of situations that may create disappointments. But these situations are nobody's fault. They just happen. Things just don't work out the way we want them to. Sometimes our dreams just fall apart and we feel disappointed and hurt. It is not easy to shrug off these feelings. So what can we do?

Many spouses handle such a situation gracefully. Despite their hurt feelings they realize that no one could have done anything about it. But others have a hard time dealing with the disappointment and believe that their partner has failed them. After all, isn't he responsible to keep all hurt, disappointment, and unhappiness from her?

People who think so often blame their spouse for what happened and treat him as if he had sinned against her. And then the sad game begins. The accused partner tries to defend himself against these unfair accusations and suddenly both partners go to court against each other, each of them blaming the other in order to defend his or her own innocence – as if one's own innocence could only be proven by making the other one guilty. Neither of them sees that there is no guilt in the first place. And so they miss the great opportunity of working through the disappointment together. Instead of giving each other encouragement and growing together even stronger they turn against each other and end up alienated. The problem that originally led to the situation remains unsolved, because it is not talked through anymore after the feelings have calmed down. What went wrong here?

Sadly enough, this pattern happens in many relationships. Initially, neither of the two has committed a transgression. No one was guilty for the situation in the first place. But one of the spouses is just too sensitive and has never learned to deal with hurt properly. By putting the blame on her husband she triggers a chain reaction that leads the relationship to a steep decline. In the end, both partners have become guilty. They become angry – first at the situation, then at each other. And they neglect dealing with that in a godly way.

We can't do much against hurt feelings. But we can prevent them from dominating us. Rage, angry outbursts, unwarranted accusations are sinful reactions to the anger we feel (**Colossians 3:8**). And failing to resolve our anger before the day is over only opens a wide door for Satan to step in and mess with our feelings even more.



In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold (**Ephesians 4:26–27**).

A quick-tempered man does foolish things (**Proverbs 14:17a**).

For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.

(**James 3:2–6**)

The Bible clearly tells us that we need to learn to control our tongue. No matter how bad we feel, angry words and accusations don't help.

Now it is easy to say that the hurt spouse should just stop putting the blame on her husband and the problem would be solved. If it were that easy, she wouldn't do it in the first place. But there are a few helpful ideas that help a couple deal with these situations properly and to avoid the traps Satan is laying out for them. If both partners commit to following certain guidelines it will become easier to go through these situations victoriously.

1. *When you are hurt, acknowledge it to yourself.* Know yourself well enough to realize what is going on inside you. Don't ignore how you feel, since your feelings will affect your behavior unless you take control of them. Find out what it really is that is bothering you. If your feelings have to do with something he did, don't rush to the conclusion that he is responsible for your feelings or even that he has sinned against you.

The Bible tells us not to pass judgment on others or condemn them (**Luke 6:37**). Your feelings are real, but they are your responsibility, not your spouse's.

Children sometimes grow up feeling that their parents are omnipotent. They can give them everything they want and can keep all hurt away from them. Over the time this becomes their definition of love. If they experience disappointment or pain, they rather believe that their parents don't love them than accepting that something is beyond their parents' powers. Mature adults should have outgrown this kind of thinking. Your spouse cannot keep all hurt and disappointment away from you. This is not a lack of love but just a sign that he is not all-powerful. It doesn't help being angry at him just because *you* feel hurt.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage or anger (**Ephesians 4:31a**).

2. *Communicate your feelings.* Don't pretend that everything is o.k. when you actually feel hurt. It doesn't help sweeping problems under the rug, because that prevents them from being solved. Your spouse is going to sense anyway, that something is wrong, and lying about it only makes things worse.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (**Ephesians 4:25**).

Let your spouse know how you are feeling. If you are feeling hurt by something that he did or did not do, let him know that as well – but do not blame him for that. The point is that he needs to understand what is going on inside you and what has led to these feelings. Communicate to him that you know that the problem is yours and that you only want him to understand and help you.

As before, it helps to *use "I" statements* – talking about what is going on inside you and the situation that led to these feeling, not about the fact that *he* did something that hurt you. This may be difficult, if you are used to holding others responsible for negative things in your life and have never learned to communicate in this way. But you can train this form of communication. If you want your message to come across, you have to make sure that don't sound as if you were blaming your spouse.

But what do you do if he does not understand what you? Then the best thing you can do is let it be.

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent (**Proverbs 10:19**).

He who guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin (**Proverbs 13:3**).

You have made your point and you can't knock things over his head just because he doesn't understand what is so obvious to you. Adding more and more words to the subject doesn't help but increases the risk that you sound like blaming him after all.

3. *Empathize.* If you are on the other side of the hurt, try to show empathy for your spouse's feelings instead of devaluing them – even if you can't identify with these feelings. Showing empathy doesn't mean that you have to feel the same way or that you accept that everything was your fault. But it does express that you care. Take time to listen instead of trying to give advice right away.

Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, (**James 1:19**)  
Love is patient and kind; . . . Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. (**1. Corinthians 13:4a,5b, RSV**)

When you communicate that you understand how she feels, you are becoming part of the healing process . . . instead of part of the problem.

4. *Identify patterns and plan.* Quite often, hurt feelings reoccur in similar situations. If this is the case, it helps to find out what situations are causing the hurt, so that you may better anticipate things and take precautions to avoid them – or at least to react to them in a helpful manner.

For instance, you may realize that one partner feels neglected when the other one is under stress, so you both have to think about ways to reduce this stress or, if this is not always possible, to give early warning signals and then try to find tiny little time slots just for the two of you.

Or, you may realize that certain situations trigger an old hurt or fear from past events that you have not really overcome yet. In this case you may need to pursue healing in that area through counseling or therapy to stop it from interfering with your life.

5. *Guard against “going to court”.* When one of you feels hurt, don’t try to find out who is right and who is wrong. There is little to be gained by that. The feelings are real and both of you should accept that. But unless there is an obvious sin involved, these feelings have little to do with wrongdoings. They need to be addressed with understanding and empathy, not by going to court and condemning each other.

When you try to convince your spouse that he has done something wrong to cause these feelings, your hearts will become disconnected. Instead of getting the understanding and empathy you desire, he will only distance himself from you and your hurt will increase. If you avoid going to court you can work on the problem together.

Marriage is a place where feelings get stepped on. We can’t avoid this. But we can avoid that hurt feelings separate us, if we commit ourselves to being a healing agent for our spouse, with empathy, understanding, nondefensiveness, and care.

## 10.4 Conflicting desires

One of the most common conflicts in a relationship arises from the fact that we have different desires that cannot be met at the same time. We all have experienced situations like the following

- One person wants to go out while the other likes to spend the evening at home.
- One person likes to watch adventure movies, the other prefers comedies.
- One likes to spend money on improving the house, the other wants to save the money for larger investments in the future.
- One wants to spend the vacations on the beach, the other in the mountains.
- One prefers a traditional worship service, the other one finds this boring and prefers a more contemporary style.

There are plenty of areas, where we may experience conflicting desires, because two people bring different preferences into the relationship. In fact, the differences between us were exactly what attracted us to each other in the first place. We complement each other – each seeing a strength or fascinating aspect in the other, which is so beautifully different from what we are used to. That is the way we look at these differences during courtship. But after a while, these differences also create conflicts, because sometimes our desires cannot be satisfied ... because our spouse wants to see her desires met as well.

Ideally, conflicting desires can be negotiated easily if both partners develop a pattern of give and take. In a relationship where both partners really care for each other, each will happily see to it that his spouse's needs are filled, without fearing that his own desires will be permanently neglected.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. **(Ephesians 5:21-22, 25)**

Give, and it will be given to you **(Luke 6:38)**

But sometimes even the most caring couple hits a stalemate, where each finds it difficult to give into the desires of the other. What should we do in these situations? Determine that, after all, the husband is the boss and should have the right to decide? Or use the old *“if you really love me, then you ...”* argument?

Here are a few principles that can help making sure that conflicting desires do not lead to conflicts in the relationship.

1. *Question your own preferences.* Some of the things that seem to be extremely important to you may not be your true desires: seeing them met will not give you real fulfillment, but only some temporary satisfaction, which soon will give room to new things that you “must” have or do.

A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions **(Luke 12:15b)**.  
How hard is it for the rich to enter the kingdom of God **(Luke 18:24)**.

This is easy to see when it comes to material possessions. Often we believe that we “must” have certain things that in some way or the other are very appealing to us. We fall trap to commercials, which tell us that we deserve the best, we see that others have it, or we are just attracted by things that we see or read about. But when we really think about it, we realize that we don't really need these things to feel happy, but that our true motives for wanting them are something else. We want to keep up with our neighbors and friends, we want to impress someone, we want others to think highly of us, we want to feel good about our ability to buy expensive things, etc. And so we go and buy many things that don't give us the fulfillment that we desire.

But there are other preferences that we may have to question as well, because they do not express our true desires. Some people are driven to compete in sports, for instance, to cover feelings of insecurity. For the same reasons, others work overtime to make more money. Still others have to be busy all the time, because they feel guilty when they relax although there are still things that could or “need to” be done. Guilty feelings are also the reason why people do service projects in church without having a heart for this service. There are people who always have to work on improving things around the house or on keeping it neat and perfect, because they are ashamed of what people might think about them. Many of these activities take time away from the family, but are done out of impure motives. They are not really what we desire, and consequently, we will not find fulfillment in them.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (**James 4:3**).

When you get to do what you prefer – can you really enjoy it? If the joy is shallow or if guilty feelings are creeping up after a while, chances are that your true desires are something else. Check the motives for your preferences. You may find more fulfillment giving into the relationship than investing into “pleasures”.

2. *Avoid moralizing your (legitimate) preferences.* In most relationships one partner is more active than the other and prefers to do “projects” while the other occasionally just wants to relax. For instance, a wife may prefer to use the weekends for rearranging things in the house, adding decoration, etc., while he just wants to play games with the kids or watch TV.

In these situations the active spouse may be tempted to believe that her priorities are superior to his – after all doing something has a higher moral value than just hanging around, doesn’t it? So she may feel that he should help her doing her important tasks instead of being so lazy. On the other hand he may feel that after a week of hard work he deserves a rest and that she shouldn’t disturb his peace by being so compulsive.

Neither of the two is right in how they feel about the other. When it comes to conflicting desires, there is no right or wrong, no morally higher ground. It is just a matter of preferences and you can’t claim your spouse’s preferences to be inferior to yours just because your preferences have a moral-sounding quality to it, such as working and accomplishing something, being intellectually stimulating or edifying, being more tasteful, aiming at togetherness, etc.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven (**Ecclesiastes 3:1**).

Make sure you realize that your desire is not a higher one than your spouse's. His desires have the same right to be met as yours. Don't try to "win" by making yours right and your spouse's "wrong". Each of your true desires need to be met in due time.

3. *Empathize with your spouse's desires and understand their importance.* Your spouse's desires, as strange as they may appear to you at times, are just as real to him or her as your desires are to you. Accept them as real and good – never devalue what your spouse wants.

Of course, if some of your spouse's desires seem unrealistic or even questionable to you, you may have to point that out in a loving way. But make sure that your own preferences don't cloud your judgment (recall **Matthew 7:3–5**) and stay away from statements that make it sound as if her desires are less important than yours. Giving up a preference should always be a deliberate choice – not a forced decision.

4. *Meet your spouse's desires before you meet your own.* This is the best advice for dealing with conflicting desires.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.. Each of you should look not only into your own interests but also the interests of others (**Philippians 2:3–4**)

If we are trying to make sure that our mate gets what she desires first, arguments over who gets his own way will soon cease to exist. By doing so we express how much we love and value her and what we will receive in return is far more worth than seeing our preferences met.

Sometimes, of course, this can result in the funny situation that both want to give and refuse to accept. But these arguments are of a different nature (unless you want to force your will on your spouse to quench guilty feelings) and will soon create an atmosphere of mutual giving and taking. You may gladly accept the gift of love this time, knowing that next time you are permitted to give.

5. *If there is no other way, keep and account of yours, mine, and ours.*

Ideally, the above four steps help settling arguments about conflicting desires, since they are based on love and understanding. Unfortunately, not all relationships are mature enough to actually proceed in this way and arguments about who gets his way go on and on.

In this case it may help to establish rules that both agree to follow when dealing with conflicting desires. Keeping an account of "yours", "mine", and "ours" makes sure that conflicting desires are treated fairly and puts an end to meaningless arguments. Today one partner decides how to evening will be spent and

tomorrow the other. Each partner has the right to decide how a certain part of the family budget will be spent.

Setting up an accounting system like this may seem embarrassing in the beginning but it reminds both partners that they have to share finite resources such as time and money and that they need to spend them wisely. It prevents one spouse from always “overdrawing” the account at the expense of the other, turning him or her into the perpetual loser of the relationship. It is no substitute for a loving relationship, but helps bridging the period until the partners have learned to connect to each other and rebuilt their love. There are, however, a few caveats that need to be considered when you keep score like that.

*Don't redefine an “I” choice as a “we” choice.* If you enjoy togetherness, you may be tempted counting everything you two do together as “we” choice, although most of it is actually for yourself. You are not “giving” into the relationship, but fulfill your own desires by doing things that include your partner, who may prefer to spend certain amounts of time just by himself.

When you want your spouse to do something together with you, make sure that he really wants to do that as well before you book it onto the “we” account. Otherwise remember that he goes along for *you* and not for the both of you and count it in the “mine” column.

*Make sure “we’s” are agreed upon.* Activities that affect both of you should be talked through together before a decision is made. If you object but never speak up, you may feel resentment about that choice later while your spouse is totally unaware of the fact that you did not really agree. When you give into the relationship, we should do so freely and not carry a grudge or emotional debt.

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly of under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (**2. Corinthians 9:7**)

Keep in mind that keeping score is only a step towards overcoming a lack of maturity and trust in your relationship. Eventually you have to transform scores into a relationship that is dominated by the desire to give to your spouse rather than to receive from her (**Acts 20:35**).

6. *Expand your horizon and grow.* When you give in to the desires of your spouse, you may find out that you actually like some of the things she likes. You just didn't like them before because you never tried. Instead of fighting your spouse, consider giving to her preferences in as a learning and stretching experience. She may know something that you don't.

For instance, if you don't care much about decoration and arts, you may learn from allowing your spouse to make the house more beautiful according to her

taste. If you can't imagine that camping in a tent rather than staying at hotels and hiking through the back country instead of just driving through can be a rewarding experience, you may see the world quite differently after the two of you have done this together a few times.

If you try to see things through your partner's eyes, you may learn to enjoy things that you have never thought possible. After all, she likes it for a reason. Try find out what it is – and make sure you try it more than once. Even if you will not grow to like it, you will understand your spouse better and your relationship grows.

## **10.5 Individual desires versus the needs of the relationship**

Sometimes in a relationship one partner has desires that conflict with the needs of the relationship itself. You may want to go back to school to get a higher degree and improve your career chances, but the family may need the time and money. A new job opportunity may open up but accepting it would require your family to relocate and create a lot of disruption. Your spouse may desire to spend some time for himself after having worked hard for a season. You may want to look for a less strenuous job but that would reduce the family income. After 25 years in the Northeast your spouse may want to move back to a warmer location but that that would require both of you to give up you current jobs, friends, and church family. You may desire to go on a short term missionary trip to a foreign country but your spouse is bound by his job. You may feel called to the mission field in some foreign country, but know that living circumstances will be more than difficult for your wife and children.

In each case, meeting the desire of one individual would come at the expense of the family. Does that mean the desire is selfish and should be ignored?

Not necessarily. The situation is different from the one where the desires of both partners are in conflict. In fact, it may even be the case that both partners realize that it would be good to meet that particular desire. However, they also realize that meeting this desire would come at a cost and put some strain at the relationship or the family. So what should we do?

The rule her is that there should be no fixed rule for dealing with this situation. No relationship is going to survive unless both partners will get their desires met.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (**1. Corinthians 12:26**).

But the relationship will not grow, if both aim at meeting the individual needs at the expense of the relationship. We need to find the right balance between meeting individual desires and investing into the relationship over the long term. There are times where we have to focus on the growth of the relationship and other times, where we need to take care of each partner's needs.



For instance, if a mother has sacrificed her personal desires for the family for years, it may be the right thing for the family to accept sacrificing for her, so that she can go back to school and pursue a particular talent into a career. A family may decide to relocate, so that the father can accept a new position, if no equivalent opportunities are available nearby. A couple may realize that allowing one partner to go alone on a two-month missionary trip is worth enduring the temporary separation. Or they may decide that this is more than both of them can endure. You may decide that it is wiser to postpone becoming a missionary until your children are out of school and agree to prepare for an early retirement that allows both of you to go into the mission field then.

The important aspect here is finding a proper long-term balance, but allowing temporary imbalances, even situations where the relationship only serves one member for a certain amount of time – for instance during the time when one partner finishes a new degree. However, if the relationship always serves only one member and never the others, or if all members only take from the relationship but never sacrifice for it, then the proper balance is lost.

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” **(Ephesians 5:28–31)**

Marriage means giving up some of your individual rights for the sake of the relationship. Sometimes, the marriage returns the favor and sacrifices for the individual. In the end, the relationship grows as each member grows.

Here are some practical hints for dealing with desires that conflict with the needs of the relationship.

1. *Remember that marriage comes first.* Giving into the relationship is more important than your individual desires. We have gotten used to instant gratification and paying for it afterwards. But marriage is not like a credit card: you cannot draw energy from it unless you have previously invested into it. Learn to postpone gratification and to wait for the right time when the relationship can afford to meet your needs.
2. *Be clear about what you want.* Don't just passively hope that your specific desires will be met someday. Your spouse cannot read your mind, no matter how hard he tries, so he cannot work on getting this desire met. Be explicit and tell your spouse clearly what you desire. But accept that your desire may not be met right away. Both of you have to decide together when and how that shall happen.
3. *Be excited about what your spouse wants* for him- or herself. Even if initially you cannot understand at all why he wants this, make sure that you listen carefully

with an open heart, instead of becoming angry about it (**James 1:19–20**). Because the two of you are “one”, giving in to the needs of the other will create growth from which you will benefit as well (**Luke 6:38**).

4. *Pray for guidance* In areas where it is difficult to make a decision, remember that God gives wisdom generously to those who ask Him (**James 1:5–7**). Ask for wisdom and spiritual strength, so that you will be ready to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit who lives in you (**Ephesians 3:16**).
5. *Make sure that your individual desires are balanced.* If on the long run you take much more from the relationship than your spouse, the relationship between the two of you will suffer, since the mutual giving and taking has gone lost.
6. *Make long-term plans* for individual things that go at the expense of the relationship. This way you can plan together how to sacrifice for meeting the individual need instead of having to make hurried, unreflected decisions. Immediate requests that have to be dealt with now or never feel more like demands and should be avoided as much as possible. In most cases, opportunities that force us to make immediate decisions with major consequences appear much better than they really are and often have a hidden catch that we don't see right now.

Altogether, aim at a balance between relationship needs and individual needs. Avoid stiff rules, but let the Holy Spirit guide you so that both you and your relationship can grow.

## 10.6 Hidden Faults

Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. (**Psalms 19:12–13**)

We all have aspects to our personalities and character that we are not really aware of. It is part of being human to have a blind spot for certain of our faults. This doesn't mean that we deny their existence, but that we simply don't see them and therefore cannot deal with them.

One of a great advantages of a marriage relationship is that we can become partners in dealing with hidden faults. Our spouses may see and know things about us that we don't know and can help us to become aware of them. The responsibility to deal with the problem is still ours, but we can work on this together (**Ecclesiastes 4:9–10**). There are two types of hidden faults: patterns that have already been talked about and thus are known in principle, and problems that are not yet known to either of you. It is obvious that these need to be handled in different ways

**Conflict in Known Problems.** If you have talked about a problem before, the problem is not really hidden anymore. You know at least about its existence even if you may not know why and when it happens. It is also clear who has the problem and that it needs to be worked on. Here are a few hints for handling such problems.

1. *If the problem is yours, fixing it is your responsibility.* Only you are in charge of your personality and character. Don't blame your spouse for faults that lie in you, if you already know that you have that problem. Your spouse can help, but you are responsible for resolving the problem. You have to take initiative and you are the one who has to make sure the problem is actually being worked on.
2. *Agree about what to do when the problem re-occurs.* each party should know what to expect in this case. Make sure that the one responsible for dealing with the problem cannot get away with it easily. If there are no consequences for "misbehavior" then there is no incentive for change. For instance, you may agree that if your partner is tardy again, she will get left behind. Or if he spends too much again, he will have to pay it back or work it off.

But make sure that consequences are agreed upon ahead of time so that they don't appear as unfair punishment when you have to follow through with them.

3. *If the problem is your spouse's, support but don't enable.* We talked about this over and over again. If you make it easy for your spouse to get away with his faults, you become a part of the problem. How should he fully grasp that his behavior needs to change if he doesn't see the negative effects of it.
4. *Confront, but do not police your spouse.* The whole issue of confronting your spouse and having him experience the consequences of his actions is to help him outgrow the pattern and to win him back (**Matthew 18:15**). You want to heal the problem by making him aware of it, but not control his behavior by watching over him like a police officer over a suspect.

**Conflict in Unknown Problems.** If neither of you is aware of a certain problem, there is little you can do to prevent it. But you can agree how to deal with such problems in a loving way when they occur.

1. First of all, *agree that you have permission to tell each other what you observe.* Both of you want to grow and get rid of hidden faults. If you allow your spouse to make you aware of issues you don't see, and if you commit yourself to tell your spouse what you notice, then you become partners in discovery and experience dealing with it as a team.

However, when you communicate your observations to your spouse, be careful to stick to the facts and avoid interpretations (which may be clouded by your

personal preferences – recall **Matthew 7:3–5**). Otherwise, what was supposed to be a helpful remark may come across as insult or character attack.

2. *When confronted, be open and not defensive.* Accept feedback as something positive even if you don't like what you hear about yourself. Even if you don't agree with him, at least agree to look at yourself again and check if it is true.

Ask your spouse to show you each time when this fault occurs, not just the first time. Humans tend to see problems and mistakes as one-time events and do not see if a pattern develops. Catching yourself over and over again will slowly convince you and prevent the problem from becoming a permanent habit.

3. *Seek feedback from others, too.* Good friends will be honest about your mistakes as well (**Proverbs 27:6, 17:17, 17:10**). If you hear the same thing from several people, you will believe it more, even if it does not fit into what you believe yourself to be.

4. Finally, make sure to *give grace to each other*. Hearing from you about his mistakes will not be easy for your spouse, particularly in areas that are new discoveries for him. Change will not always happen immediately. Give him time, but be firm.