

The High-Leverage Family

Fightin' Words

April 27, 2014

PRELUDE – Immortal Invisible
Worship – Immortal Invisible / The Love of God

Feature – “I Won’t Give Up”

Drama – “Between Takes”

Good morning everyone. As Shannon said we are continuing in our *High-Leverage Family* series and today, if you haven’t figured it out from the song and the drama, we are going to talk about everyone’s *favorite* part of being married – *conflict*. “Conflict” ... the very word itself inspires fear and trembling; visions of short but intense confrontations on the battlefield between opposing armies, or long drawn-out stalemates between hostile nations. No one truly enjoys conflict.

However conflict is a part of marriage (actually, it’s part of every meaningful relationship, even business partnerships). And, in spite of Pat and Patty’s misguided assertions, people who are happily married *do* fight. Even happily married Christians fight. *They just do it differently from most everyone else*. Happily married people do conflict in a way that transforms it from a dangerous and potentially destructive enemy to a life-giving ally.

And that’s a really big deal but not just because conflict is unpleasant for everyone involved. It’s a really big deal because *the way that a couple handles conflict and the tension* arising from unintentional offenses and outright sinful behaviors *is the single greatest factor in whether their marriage will succeed or fail*. How you do conflict with your spouse is more important than your family background, where you live, how much money you have, how good sex is, whether or not your desires to have children or any other goals are met. It’s even more important than having compatible beliefs or personalities.

In short, *it’s your fightin’ words that matter the most* ... which is why I have included this topic as one of the five high-leverage principles in this series.

Last week you may remember the first high-leverage principle was to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This week it’s “fightin’ words matter the most.” Get this one thing right and you will dramatically change the dynamic of your marriage for the better – especially if you are struggling.

And this is not something I came up with on my own nor is it something exclusively prescribed by the Bible (although it is prescribed which we’ll see a bit later). Numerous research projects from both religious and secular organizations have all come to this same conclusion. In fact, some of those organizations claim to be able to predict with better than 90% accuracy which marriages will end in divorce based on this single factor.

One of those is the Gottman Institute of Marriage headed by Dr. John Gottman. Dr. Gottman and his colleagues (including his wife, Julie, who is also a marriage researcher) have been around for quite a long time – since the late 1980s – studying thousands of individual marriages; what makes them work and not work; why they succeed and why they fail. Their

research is fascinating. Among other things, they have discovered that ...

The single greatest predictor of marital failure or success is the ratio of positive to negative interactions.

Successful, happy marriages feature a five to one ratio of positive to negative interactions; destined-to-fail marriages have a ratio of .8 positive to negative.

In other words, in a happy marriage, for every 10 negative interactions there are 50 positives. In a marriage that will likely fail, for every 10 negatives there are only 8 positives.

By the way, and I'll just throw this out there for anyone who is thinking of getting married or moving in together (or who have already moved in together and thinking of getting married), *whatever your ratio is now that's pretty much what it will be when you are married*. Marriage (even moving in together) will not make things magically change for the better, although many people think it will. The deal is, if this is who you and your significant other are as a couple today, this is who you will be in marriage ... unless you change how you are doing conflict.

Negatives Defined

Of course, a really good question at this point is "what exactly is meant by negative interactions?" Gottman and his team have identified four that are crucial. He calls them "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" in reference to the scene in the New Testament book of Revelation where God releases four horses and riders who bring conquest, war, hunger, and death to the earth at "the end of days" before Christ returns. In this case, however, the metaphor is used to describe four negative communication styles that can predict the end of a marriage relationship (and, I think, any kind of relationship).

Now, I could list them out for you but I think it would be more interesting to let Dr. Gottman do it himself. I want to show you part of an interview he had with Anderson Cooper which I thought was excellent. It's a little longer than some of the clips we typically use but it includes video of real couples engaging in these particular negative interactions, so I think it's worth watching.

As we do watch, if you're married or you're significantly involved with someone, you might ask yourself how many of these are typical of you and this person. Here we go.

Video Clip: Gottman – The Four Horsemen (5.0 min)

(B) Cooper: "You say that there are four negative patterns."

(E) Gottman: "You escalate, so it's a very destructive pattern."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

And that, I think, is a very important point. The issue or danger isn't just the isolated occurrences of "the four horsemen" (or negative interactions). Every couple, even in the best of marriages, has times where they criticize or stonewall or they're defensive; even times when they show contempt for their partner. The danger is when these become *ongoing patterns of behavior*. And patterns develop, as Dr. Gottman said, through escalation.

For example, if I feel like Jetta is overly-criticizing me (and this is just hypothetical, it never happens) at some point, I might become defensive. And if she presses harder because of my defensiveness, I perceive it as even more criticism ... so I might stonewall or maybe, if it stings enough, I might lash out and say something that she perceives as contemptuous.

And then *she* would react defensively and things would continue to deteriorate even more.

But last week I told you that at about 10-years into our marriage, we found ourselves constantly fighting about everything and even wondering if we might be at the point where people called it quits. I didn't know anything about Gottman's magic ratio at that point, but I would bet that we were nowhere near the five-to-one positive-to-negative interaction ratio and, quite possibly, very close to the other ratio where marriages do end ... because this is what our life was like. It was this constant repetition or pattern. We were trapped in what another marriage researcher – Dr. Emerson Eggerichs – calls “the crazy cycle.”

This little diagram illustrates how it works.



According to Eggerichs, when a husband acts in ways that his wife perceives as unloving, when you're in the crazy cycle, she then reacts in ways that he perceives as disrespectful to him ... to which he then reacts in ways she feels are unloving ... which leads her to react to him in ways that make him think she doesn't respect him. And on and on it goes.

It's “down dooby do down down” from that point on. Making up is hard to do.

Why Bother?

Now, I've just spent quite a bit of time explaining the problem which, I think, is interesting and, hopefully, even helpful in trying to understand where *your* marriage and relationships are these days. But what we really need is a solution to this problem so that we can have marriages (and relationships in general) that are, at the very least, peaceful and harmonious and, if at all possible, joyful and fulfilling.

And from everything you've just seen and heard, you might be tempted to think that the solution is to do whatever it takes to avoid conflict (so you don't get into one of these patterns) and just pretend that things are OK between you and your spouse when they are not. Just suck it up and move on whenever you're hurt or whenever commitments aren't kept or there's tension about finances or sex or kids or ...

But that's not really the answer because that strategy, as it turns out, has its own set of negative consequences.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Ephesus:

Put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

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 4:25-27 (NIV)

In other words, if you keep storing up the hurts and offenses; if they linger with you day after day and you never speak

truthfully about them, then you are giving the enemy of your soul a foothold in your life.

Well, what does *that* mean?

It means that what's going to happen to you if you do not deal with your anger is that you're going to become bitter and jaded. You're going to develop toxic emotional sludge which is going to grow deep in your soul like a cancer. And then, eventually, either something will snap internally – you'll have a nervous breakdown – or it will snap externally – you'll do something crazy and destructive not only to yourself but to everyone around you.

Not dealing with your anger in an appropriate manner is as much and as dangerous of a sin as dealing with it an inappropriate manner. Continually stuffing it over the long-haul is no better than repeatedly exploding in the short-term. Both are bad. Both “give the devil a foothold” to put it in Paul's terminology.

The solution is not to avoid conflict but to address it in such a way as to not add to the problem that created it in the first place!

As a pastor I see people fall into this trap all the time and, honestly, I've been in it myself more times than I can count.

For instance, let's say that there's an issue causing tension between a husband and wife who are remodeling their house. And the issue itself is not a big deal; it's about a level two out of 10 on the emotional impact scale in their relationship. And, just for detail, we're remodeling our house. Jetta and I are remodeling our house and I want cream colored cabinets with bright colorful backsplash and paint; Jetta wants rich dark cabinets with more subdued colored backsplash and paint that matches the existing décor of the rest of our house. There's tension but, in the overall scheme of things, it's truly not that big of a problem.

But we could deal with that tension in such a way that adds two or four or six points to the emotional impact scale. I could criticize her for being stuck in her ways. She could show contempt for my off-the-wall thinking. And the next thing you know, the emotional impact is up to six or eight and the conflict isn't about the remodel anymore. That's been completely obscured now by the way in which we've handled it – the number of trips we've taken around the crazy cycle!

And now we have to unravel all of that before we can ever get back to the original issue ... which is why, for couples who have been in this crazy cycle for a long time, at this point, might say “why bother? Maybe we're just not compatible. Maybe it would be best for us to split. Maybe each of us should part ways as amicably as possible and look for someone else that we can better get along with.”

Let's think about that. Let's suppose you did that. What would happen – besides the fact that you would give lots of money to lawyers and split your kids' loyalties and make your life even more complex than it already is on birthdays and holidays?

What would happen – and I've seen this over and over again so I'm not just making this up or blowing smoke – is that *you* would do some things to change yourself.

- You'd lose some weight and get in shape.
- You'd give up some of your bad habits (the things your spouse has complained about all these years).
- You'd stop being so demanding and be more considerate of others wishes and opinions.

- You'd give some consideration to how you talk and interact with the opposite sex ...

... and you'd do these things so as to make yourself more attractive and desirable to the yet-to-be-discovered Mr. or Ms. Right.

Now, think about that. You would do all of those things in the future for someone you've never even met ... but you won't do it today for the person who is the mother or father of your children; the person with whom and in whom you have invested lots of time and money and emotional effort; the person who, at one point, you felt so strongly about that you stood up in front of God and everybody else and pledged "til death do us part."

I don't know but that seems kind of short-sighted to me. It doesn't seem like a very wise expenditure of emotional and financial capital.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying in this. I'm not trying to minimize the damage that's done by years and years of living in a crazy cycle or being overrun by Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Marital Apocalypse. And I'm not saying there is never a reason to divorce because there is: infidelity, abuse and desertion are all biblical grounds for ending a marriage that cannot be saved.

However, I *am* saying that instead of deciding because of all the conflict you've had with this person that you must have married the wrong one and that you need to rip up your life and go on a search for the right one, maybe you need to focus instead on *becoming the right one yourself*. As the old Clint Black song put it "wherever you go, there you are." You're taking all that with you. See, if you jump on the crazy cycle now whenever there is conflict, if that's your style, if that's how you learned to do conflict; if you saddle up one of those four horses now whenever there's a conflict, *that's what you're going to do then* because that's what you have been choosing to do, and it is a choice. You have been choosing to deal with conflict that way already. It's not going to change just because you're changing whoever you're looking for or wanting to live with.

And this actually brings me to an issue that came up after each service last week. After every service at least one person came to me and asked something to the effect of "what if I *am* submitting to my husband or wife out of reverence for Christ and they aren't submitting back? What if I'm respecting my husband but I don't feel like he's loving me well? What if I'm loving my wife as Jesus loved the church but she isn't respecting me? What should I do about that? How long should I put up with that?"

Well, the answer is, it depends. It depends on what you believe to be the fundamental purpose of marriage. And before I go any further I want to make it very clear that what I'm about to say is directed to people who say they are believers in Jesus. I'm talking to people who have come to the point in their lives where they have confessed their dead-in-sin condition before God and received Jesus as their savior and have been justified by what he did on the cross and in his resurrection. That's who I'm speaking to right now, so listen carefully.

Most people in this world believe that God (if He really does exist and cares about such things as this) ... most people believe that God led them to their spouse primarily *to make them happy*. Let me say that again. Most people in this world think that God (if He really does exist and cares about such things as this) is playing matchmaker ... the reason he's playing matchmaker is that he's leading you to the one so that you can be happy.

(Correspondingly - I'll just throw this in for free - since a lot of people believe that, they also believe if they haven't found a husband or wife then God must be holding out on them. God must be mad at them for some reason and doesn't want them to be happy so they get mad at God ... but that's a topic for another day).

Since most married people believe that God led them to their spouse in order to make them happy, therefore, if they aren't happy, they conclude that God must want them to move on. Just be done with the whole thing.

But that is not the case for those who are Christians. Yes, God wants you to be happy but that is not His primary purpose for your marriage.

I say that because of an interesting passage in the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. Apparently, they had some questions concerning whether or not marriage was a good idea given the current conditions of their world. And Paul wrote back to them that, "It is good for a man not to marry" probably because it was a lot easier to be single in the middle of persecution than to be married.

But, then he wrote ...

Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. 1 Corinthians 7:2 (NIV)

Now, in the original Greek text, it's pretty obvious that Paul is talking about maintaining sexual purity through marriage, but Gary Thomas, in his book *Sacred Marriage*, suggests that Paul's point here actually goes further than just the sexual dimension.

"Since there is so much immorality within us," Thomas paraphrases, "not just lust, but selfishness, anger, tendencies to control and manipulate, and even hatred –

... we should enter into a close relationship with one other person so we can work on these issues in light of what our marriage relationship will reveal to us about our behavior and attitudes."

In other words, your marriage will hold a mirror up to you like nothing else in this world. In line with that, of his own marital experience, Thomas continues, "I found that there was a tremendous amount of immaturity within me that my marriage directly confronted. The key was that I had to change my view of marriage. If the purpose of marriage is simply to enjoy an infatuation and to make me 'happy' then I'd have to get a 'new' marriage every two or three years. But if I really wanted to see God transform me from the inside out, I'd need to concentrate on changing myself rather than changing my spouse. In fact, you might even say that the more difficult my spouse proved to be, the more opportunity I'd have to grow."

"What if God had an end in mind," he concludes, "that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place?"

"What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?"

I think he's right – and again, I'm speaking to Christians when I say this. If you're not a follower of Jesus, this doesn't really apply to you. Christian marriage is not only for your happiness, it's for your holiness, and when you understand that

God has put your spouse there for your growth and development and has put you in your spouse's life for their growth and development, you don't run away just because they aren't submitting to you like you are submitting to them. You see them as part of the process He's using to develop your character, and you see yourself as part of the process He's using to develop their character, and you hang in there. And when you do that, more often than not good stuff starts to happen because *you* change.

And that's the ultimate reason as to why we should bother with conflict. This is why we should learn how to deal with it without getting on the crazy cycle and making things even worse.

And in saying that, I don't want to minimize the effect that dealing with conflict appropriately has on marital fulfillment because it does make a difference. Gottman's research determined that about 7 of 10 happy couples still have *the very same unresolved conflicts after 10 years*, but they remain happy because they do not get gridlocked in the conflict.ⁱ

So, dealing with conflict appropriately both builds character and also increases or at least maintains a level of happiness.

Easy Steps?

Of course, some of you are thinking at this point, "But Rick you haven't told us how to do it. How do you get off the crazy cycle or keep from getting on it in the first place? How do you stop riding the four horses of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling?"

That's easy. Just choose to do the opposite regardless of what your spouse does.

Gottman even has a little diagram to illustrate it.



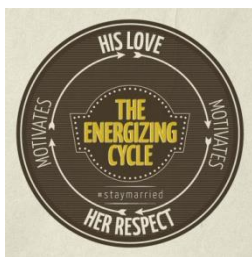
In a conflict situation ...

- Instead of criticism, voice a complaint gently.
- Instead of defensiveness, take responsibility for whatever is your part in the situation.
- Instead of expressing contempt, start expressing appreciation for the things that you can.
- Instead of stonewalling – ask for a time-out to cool off.

And he goes on to say that the 5-to-1 positive interactions in non-conflict situations should include things like displays of interest, affection, humor, empathy, and affirming body language (like eye contact and head nodding).ⁱⁱ

So, just choose to start doing *that* stuff instead of the other stuff.

Eggerichs also has a little diagram which he calls “the energizing cycle.”



I think you can see that it’s the opposite of the crazy cycle. When a man loves his wife without condition, Eggerichs says, that motivates her to respect him without condition which then motivates him to love her even more which then motivates her to ... and so on and so forth. You get this huge positive momentum going in the relationship.

And this is true. I’ve experienced it in my own marriage.

So, the answer is just make the choice to love or respect your spouse regardless of what your spouse does.

See how easy this is?

Not.

Here’s the truth. This is not easy at all because when our spouses do not love or respect us as they should; when they unintentionally hurt us or intentionally mistreat us, our hearts cry out for justice. We want fairness. We want equality. We want to be submitted to before submitting, just in case our submitting first might put us in a position where we lose whatever we feel isn’t worth losing.

The truth is that living this way – engaging in conflict in healthy constructive ways instead of running from it and then doing it in a way that doesn’t add to the problem – is one of the hardest things you will ever do in your life. Somehow, somehow, you need to find the capacity within you to do that.

Where are you going to find that? You’re not going to find it by escaping into a romance novel or pornography. I doubt you’ll find it in whining to your family and friends how inconsiderate your husband or wife is so they can support you. That’s just sick – all of that.

The truth is that you and I can only give away to others what we have already received ourselves. And what we’re talking about giving away in this conflict thing is grace and mercy. Grace that treats people better than they deserve; mercy that doesn’t give people the punishment they deserve.

And that, friends, is exactly what we find in Christ.

That’s why Paul writes “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

This is something you can do because of what has been done for you.

In fact, as I close, I want to read you what Paul wrote just before that point in his letter to the Ephesians.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (ESV)

Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 (ESV)

You have been treated this way by God in Christ ... therefore you truly are able to treat others in the same way.

Let's pray together.

... to experience grace and mercy
... to be changed at the heart level
... to be wise in our words
... to accept where you have put us
... to forgive as we have been forgiven

Feature – “Losing”

CLOSING COMMENTS / OFFERING AT DOOR

Two things before we leave ...

1. More info on marriage issues via the “Right Now” Media section of our website.

(pic) To get to that go to our website and click on Media and then the “Right Now” option.

That will take you to a page where you can sign up for access to the media.

Then you sign in and you can access the content. We've already populated our channel (sort of like Netflix).

2. Will say more as we get closer ... Eggerich's “Love and Respect” course will be taught as part of a series of personal growth and development courses to be offered in June. Info on that and other courses next Sunday at information tables in the commons.
3. Offering at the door.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Marriage Clinic, John Gottman, 1994

ⁱⁱ <http://www.gottmanblog.com/search/label/four%20horsemen>