

MEDIATING THE MISERABLE CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

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A CYCLE OF DESPAIR

- From the initial contact on, we listen carefully for the details of the “cycle of despair” in which this couple is caught (Galatians 6:1). The miserably married Christian couple is in a “rut” of deeply engrained bitterness, gracelessness, and uncharitable presumption. “The Great Wall of China” exists between this couple. It was built one brick—one offense—at a time and it is *immense*.

- We are called to first preach the gospel to each other (as co-conciliators) *and then* call the parties to *remember the gospel*. We get to model the very things we are calling them to (Colossians 3).

- Christian conciliation is merely one step of the process of bringing this dead marriage to life again. *Lasting change happens within the ongoing fellowship and accountability of the local church.*

ISSUES AND IDOLS

- Pay particular attention during storytelling to how each spouse describes the same situation (and responds to the other person's interpretation). Note how each person describes the "real problem" in the marriage. ("If only ..." "Satan." "A generational bondage of anger ..." "I'm being emotionally abused.") As mediators, we help them to understand what the *Bible* says the problem is (the heart) and what the *biblical solutions* are (repentance and faith).
- For both of them—but especially for the wives—listen for the issue of *shame*. (From *Peacemaking Women*: "Shame is often experienced as a vague but overwhelming sense that no matter how hard we try, we will never be good enough ... we feel as though no matter how much we may desire relationships with others, no one will ever really want us.")
- Especially for the husbands, listen for struggles with how to be a *Christian leader*. Often by the time the case comes to us, one of the main complaints of the *wife* is that the *husband* does "not want to lead." But listen to the husband, draw him out: *how has she responded when he has tried?* Then listen for how this refers back to the wife's *shame*.
- A huge issue for the miserably married Christian couple will be *exhaustion*—even to the point of *indifference*. This couple is weary and tired of trying. They don't like each other. They are happier apart from each other. *Why would anyone call them to stay together and persevere in this marriage?* We help them to remember Who God is and all of the present means of grace in Christ. We point them to an eternal perspective—that their marriage exists to testify to the veracity of the gospel and show the world Jesus (John 17, Ephesians 5).
- There must always be a balance between *listening* and *teaching* during storytelling. In order to move the process along, we must call the parties to Christ, teach them basic biblical doctrines (God, Man, sin, justification, sanctification), and make sure they understand foundational peacemaking principles (functional idolatry, how to confess, and what it means to forgive).

SCRIPTURES AND STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE, CONFRONT, REBUKE, AND COMFORT

- The fundamental issue is, “What is causing this conflict?” The temptation is to point the finger outside of ourselves. This is why thirty years of “marriage counseling” and seminars don’t help—but a two-day mediation sometimes does. *We teach them about functional idolatry (James 4) and help them to lay hold of Christ as they repent of their idols and apply the gospel to their hearts.*
- Help them to understand the difference between justification and sanctification (Philippians 2:12-13, “...for it is God ...”). Patterns do not change overnight, but in one step and then the next step. Sin is no longer our master (1 Corinthians 10:13). Explain *The Cross Chart*. Remind them of the difference between *conviction* and *condemnation*. Use *The Triangle*.
- Help them to *create safety in their relationship*. Obviously, we can’t address 30 years of hurts—but go “deep” into one or two and then practice “gracing one another” (ministering Christ to one another) in each situation (avoid “zingers,” be specific, focus on own heart, gospel/law distinction). *Not for love and acceptance—but from the place of love and acceptance* (2 Peter 1:2-11).
- Be ready with specific brief summaries of the gospel (Ephesians 1, Titus 3) and guide them in their confessions (specificity) and as they grant forgiveness. (“Anything else?” “Let’s talk about that some more.” “That’s wonderful. Great progress. But let’s go a little deeper. Tell me about ...” “Say more ...”)

IN CONCLUSION

- A few miscellaneous things to mention:
 - Benefits of a co-conciliation team;
 - Importance of note-taking;
 - Ideas for homework;
 - Abuse situations;
 - Sex.

- Jason is always calling the husbands to be the “Chief Confessors.” Help them to see that we mediators struggle in the same ways in our married lives.

- The goal is not a happy marriage. The goal is God’s glory. (But the wonderful gift of grace is that God’s glory and our happiness intersect!) We do not want to merely *help them to feed each other’s idols*.

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