

# COVENANT KEEPERS

“Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles”

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## What causes communication breakdown?

Have you ever had a conversation with your spouse that ended without anything being accomplished? You talk over an issue for hours, and it still ends in an uncomfortable stalemate. You walk away and wonder, *What went wrong? Why couldn't we resolve this problem?* If you've had one of these conversations, then you know what a frustrating experience it can be. However, what is even more frustrating is when couples regularly communicate this way over the majority of issues in their marriages. Over time, this communication breakdown will lead a couple to conclude that nothing can be resolved by talking together. Consequently, this couple will slowly drift apart.

If you sense this despair in your relationship with your spouse, then I would encourage you to read on very carefully. You need to identify what is causing your communication breakdown and change it before you sink any deeper into this hopelessness. Don't miss this opportunity to grow in your communication skills. Doing so will add so much to your intimacy and companionship with your spouse. Solomon's wife said that her husband's voice was sweet to her and she longed to be with him (Song of Solomon 2:14). Can you say that to each other? Do you consider it a sweet thing to talk with your loved one?

If not, please consider some of the following reasons why communication can go sour in your relationship.

More important, what can you do to solve these problems?

### Identify the areas that hinder communication

1. **Stubbornness** Communication always begins with a willingness to exchange ideas on a topic in an attitude of openness and love. However, when a conflict arises with your spouse, do you dig in your heels and refuse to communicate? Do you insist upon *your* way, or your viewpoint? Stubbornness is like a wall that you set up between you and your mate. This obstacle inhibits intimacy and hardens your hearts in the midst of conflict. The wall of stubbornness must come down if communication is ever to become effective in your relationship.



*Take time to communicate!*

Stubbornness is what made it impossible for Paul and Barnabas to work out a compromise concerning their relationship with John Mark. On their first missionary journey John Mark went home before the trip was over. Consequently, when Paul and Barnabas decided to take their second missionary journey, they argued over

whether John Mark should be allowed to come again. Scripture tells us that Barnabas was “*determined*” to take John Mark, and Paul “*insisted*” that they wouldn't (Acts 15:37-38). The contention was so sharp that they parted company and went their separate ways. This communication breakdown was caused by two stubborn wills clashing with each other. Does this sound like your household?

This communication breakdown could have been resolved if there had been a little more flexibility and compromise on both sides. Both men were stubbornly defending their positions and were unwilling to see the other's point of view. This is why God asks *both* husbands and wives to submit themselves to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 5:21). Most of the time a submissive demeanor will make a solution possible. Unfortunately, this is not the way we usually respond. God acknowledged this characteristic of man's nature when He called the children of Israel a “*stiff-necked people*” (Ex. 32:9).

Are you stiff-necked and stubborn when you speak to your spouse? If your communication seems to accomplish very little, this attitude would be the first thing to check within your own heart. Won't you ask God to give you a tender heart and make you willing to look for a mutually agreed upon solution?

2. **When you are not willing to admit your fault** One of the primary ways you reveal your stubbornness is by being unwilling to acknowledge your own personal faults. When both of you are offended by the others' behavior, nothing will be accomplished until someone acknowledges his or her own personal fault. It is

**She is your companion and your wife by covenant Mal. 2:14**

usually not just one person's problem. In most cases it takes two people to cause a conflict. You may be responsible for 10% of the problem, or 90% of the problem, it makes no difference. You must take responsibility for *your* part of the problem. Jesus said, "*First, take the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye*" (Matt. 7:5).

Consequently, stop the "blame game" and the finger-pointing and start taking some responsibility for your part in the conflict. Admitting that you are at least partially at fault is the quickest and easiest way to solve any communication breakdown. Why not give it a try when the next conflict occurs?

**3. Comparison** Something else that hinders effective communication is comparison. If you say things like, "You are just like your mother," or "Why can't you act like your father?" you are making a serious mistake. Comparing your spouse with others will always bring your conversation to a dead end. Your mate will consider this a personal put-down and will immediately move into a defensive posture. Comparison is a sword that cuts right to the heart. Your mate will think you are being unfair because he is not precisely like any other person. You have made a gross generalization that you and your spouse will now waste time arguing about.

Scripture warns us against comparing. "*For we dare not... compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise*" (2 Cor. 10:12). Paul teaches that measuring yourself by yourself or by others is unwise. You really shouldn't worry about being like or unlike someone else. However, if you really want to compare yourself to someone, do it with Jesus. And then ask Him to conform you into His image, not someone else's.

Therefore, instead of comparing your spouse with others, why not try dealing with the specific issues that are driving you apart and destroying your relationship? This would be the best use of your time and effort in communication.

**4. Bringing up the past** Many times in my counseling, couples have come in with horrendous stories of how past failures have been used as a club to beat the other into submission. An intense argument has ensued, and in the end, nothing was accomplished. The only result was more anger, frustration, and, of course, greater distance between the two.

Personally, I look at the past as something that you can't do much about. The two things you can do with past sins and failures is to reconcile them and then forget them and go forward. Paul looked at life this way and encouraged us to do the same. Whether it was his failures or his successes he declared, "*But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead*" (Phil. 3:13).

However, to forget the things which are behind you, you must first forgive and reconcile them. To gain this forgiveness, go and discuss these unresolved issues with your mate and resolve them once and for all. Forgiveness and reconciliation are always the first steps toward putting an issue behind you and to opening the door to a closer relationship (Mark 11:25-26).

Then, determine that you will never bring that issue up again to use as a weapon against your spouse. Deal only with the present. This will keep you out of trouble and make your communication productive.

**5. Attacking your spouse** Have you ever had a conversation where you and your spouse spend the entire time attacking each other? One charge after another is made while the actual issue that started the conflict is forgotten. When couples are in the attack mode it is usually because they have not resolved past issues which

they are not willing to forgive (Eph. 4:31-32).

If you are ever going to effectively communicate and resolve issues, you must begin to attack the *problem* instead of the *person*. This is fundamental to solving any conflict. But, how can you stop attacking each other and start attacking the problem?

First, you must examine your own heart and acknowledge what your contribution is to the conflict. This will really help you identify the problem. It is especially important to identify what kind of communication problems you are having (i.e. Not listening, talking too much, not talking enough, interrupting, sentence finishing, blameshifting, or explosive anger).

Second, you must acknowledge your fault without trying to attack your spouse with condemning comments. Most of the time if you will approach your spouse with a humble and soft answer, it will keep your spouse from becoming defensive (Prov. 15:1-2).

Finally, resolve the problem by asking his or her forgiveness. Lovingly seek a long-term solution so that the same problem won't erupt again. When you take these actions there will be no need to attack each other.

**6. Exaggeration** Have you ever had a conversation where your spouse said to you, "You always do this" or "You never do what I ask" or "Every time you come home this happens!"? What goes through your mind when you hear these words? Don't you immediately think of at least one circumstance when you took the action you are now being charged with never doing? You then respond, "I don't always do that." Your spouse thinks, *He doesn't believe he ever does this*. Then your mate proceeds to give you another example of your failure. This conversation then quickly descends to charges and counter charges.

The only way to defuse this kind of dead end communication is to stop exaggerating. The words *always*,

never, or every time, work like gasoline on the fire of an argument. These words will cause an angry explosion because your spouse can always think of at least one time he or she *did* do what you say *never* occurs. The only solution to exaggeration is "...speaking the truth in love..." (Eph. 4:15). The truth may be that your spouse *many times* or *rarely* does this or that, as opposed to *always* or *never*. Therefore, be fair and honest as you speak with your loved one. The fruit will be rewarding.

**7. Lying** For communication to be effective, you must be truthful. When you discuss issues with your mate, do you twist the facts to suit yourself? Do you change the story when your spouse catches you with an inconsistency in your facts? When you are convicted of some failure, do you just change the subject to get the spotlight off you? If you do any of these things, you are not dealing honestly with your partner. Eventually, your spouse will realize your lack of honesty, which will result in a complete communication breakdown. Ultimately, your mate will question nearly everything you say, even when you are telling the truth. This lack of trust will cause you to become defensive. Real fellowship and communion in your relationship will cease.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know when you are being lied to or when someone is not being completely honest. Remember that a believer also has the Holy Spirit to help him discern truth. He is called the "*Spirit of Truth*" for a very good reason (John 14:17). The Spirit resides within every believer to give the added ability to discern the truth (John 16:13).

Therefore, if you want your spouse to believe you when you speak, and you want the Holy Spirit to bear witness to your words, then, start telling the truth. Paul exhorted us: "*Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another*" (Eph. 4:25.) Remember, you and your spouse are truly members one of

another. You are one flesh. However, think for a moment what would happen if your own physical members lied to you when they were injured? How long would you survive if you severely cut yourself and you felt no pain? The same is true in reference to your marriage. How can your marriage survive if you lie to each other about the issues between you?

It may be difficult at first to change a pattern of lying, especially if it has been your habit. But, you must start somewhere. If you have lied to your spouse recently, why not go back and tell the truth today. This would be an excellent way to prove the sincerity of your repentance and a good first step toward restoring your marriage relationship. After that, look up as many Scriptures as possible on the subject of lying. Write these Bible verses down on a piece of paper and read them daily so that God's encouragement and conviction may constantly occupy your thoughts and heart. Paul said that the Word was profitable to teach, convict, and correct us that we might be disciplined to righteousness (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Finally, ask God to put a guard before your lips so that before you speak a lie, God's Spirit within will convict and keep you from sin (Ps. 141:3).

**8. Harsh words** What is your first response when your spouse snaps at you with harsh words? Don't you want to snap right back? Solomon explained that "*Harsh words stirs up strife*" (Prov. 15:1). Haven't you proved this to be true? When you speak harsh words you are just beginning another fruitless conversation. This is because the wrath of man will never work the righteousness of God (James 1:20).

Instead, Solomon explained how we should persuade one another. "*By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone*" (Prov. 25:15). Notice, that a gentle word with patience is the better way to communicate your views on any subject. In other words, don't

force but rather go easy. Speak softly with honest and balanced words. This will enable you to communicate effectively and give you the best opportunity to persuade your spouse.

Therefore, if you aren't accomplishing much in your conversations, reconsider *how* you communicate. Do you harshly condemn or gently persuade? Does your tongue influence your mate with love or insist with pressure and intimidation? The quality of your conversations will answer these questions. David said in Psalm 39:1, "*I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle.*" This decision to restrain your tongue is what enables the servant of the Lord to be gentle in all things (2 Tim. 2:24).

**9. Explosive anger** One of the most dangerous ingredients in each of these communication problems is anger. Mix explosive anger into any of the previous issues and your communication will become even more futile. Scripture warns us many times that an angry man never solves problems. He only creates more problems. Proverbs 29:22 warns us, "*An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.*" Is there transgression abounding in your marriage? Explosive anger may be at the root of it. Have you ever felt like you would rather live by yourself than with your mate? Solomon knew the reason. "*Better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman*" (Prov. 21:19). This text could also easily be applied to a contentious and angry man.

In your relationship, are you the person with an explosive temper? If this is your weakness, are you willing to admit it and deal with this deficiency? If you will learn to control your explosive temper many of your communication problems will automatically disappear. Are you wondering, *How can I learn to control my anger?*

You must begin by understanding that anger itself is not evil or sinful.

Scripture commands us to “*Be angry and sin not*” (Eph. 4:26). Therefore, it is possible to be angry and not sin against God or your mate. Jesus was angry and, of course, did not sin (Mark 3:5). It is important to remember that it is only the way you express your anger that causes you to sin. Anger can be expressed in a constructive way or a destructive way, it’s your choice. Controlling your anger and allowing it to motivate you to constructive action can be done several ways.

First, you must make a choice. Choose to “*not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts*” (Rom. 6:12). When you allow sinful anger and resentment to smolder in your heart, an explosion is inevitable. Therefore, make this choice today: my anger will not continue to dominate me anymore.

Next, choose to surrender yourself to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to quench the fire of anger inside with a big bucket of His living water (John 7:37-39). His Spirit is more powerful than the passions of sinful anger. He can control you if you will just surrender to Him.

To aid in your control, be sure to deal with the small issues before they build resentment in your heart. Jesus said that we should deal with conflict “*quickly*” before it gets out of control (Matt. 5:25). Paul also taught that we should solve each problem before the sun goes down every day (Eph. 4:26). Dealing with the little issues promptly helps you to stop the boiling volcanic eruptions of rage, before they occur.

Finally, choose to listen before you speak. Most of us need to grow in our listening skills. Usually we are more ready to speak than we are to hear what others are saying. Notice the connection that the apostle James makes between listening, speaking, and wrath. “*So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*” (James 1:19). How willing are you to

hear and understand what your spouse has to say before you speak? If you don’t want to explode in anger, ask God to help you to “zip” your lips and listen. When you are slow to speak you will be slow to wrath.

If you would like to study some examples of constructive actions which were motivated by anger consider these passages: Numbers 16:15; Nehemiah 5:6-7; 1 Samuel 11:6.

Beloved, communication is the key to your marriage relationship. Don’t miss the great blessing God has in store for you and your spouse as you enjoy sweet communion with each other. Deal with those issues which can destroy your oneness and take every opportunity to draw near to one another.

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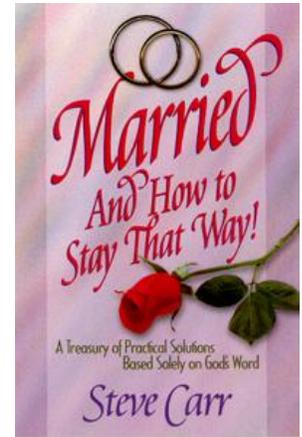
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