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Implementing Tough Love with Your Spouse.

What should you do when your spouse is behaving in a harsh and insensitive manner toward you and does not respond to your requests for change? How should you respond when your mate daily demonstrates little or no respect for you or is verbally abusive? What should you do when your spouse is using drugs, alcohol, viewing pornography, or when an adulterous relationship is revealed? Should you do nothing and act like it's not happening? Should you simply try to forgive and sweep it under the rug or should you respond by taking some action? Is there an effective way of responding to these kinds of circumstances? Yes! You should respond with tough love.

Many of you have probably heard the term *tough love* used in conversation. But, what does it mean to demonstrate tough love? What does tough love do? Can a Christian be tough and loving at the same time? The answer is yes.

However, before you try and apply the principles of tough love to your marriage, let me explain the biblical model for this means of correction. The best way to observe tough love in action is to look at how God has dealt with men and women in the Scripture. He is our ultimate role model for tough love. After you have a biblical view of God's tough love then you will understand how to apply these principles to your spouse.

How does God use tough love with His children?

1. God speaks.

Whenever God's people have rebelled against Him He has always first verbally reproved them for their evil. Love will never remain silent. For example, when King Manasseh led the entire nation of Israel into idolatry, "*the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen*" (2 Chron. 33:10). God's love

reached out with words of reproof to spare the nation from the trouble ahead.

Why does God always begin His correction with words? For two basic reasons: First, because words are God's gentle but tough way to draw His people back to Himself. The Lord said of His people, "*I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love*" (Hos. 11:4). His gentle way is why He tells us, "*By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone*" (Prov. 25:15).

Second, God uses words because they are His primary method of instruction and correction in turning His people back to righteousness. Paul declared that, "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*" (2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, one of the most important purposes of God's Word is to correct His people.

Granted, some of the messages of correction that God speaks in His Word are difficult, but that is what tough love is all about. Someone has to speak the truth in love and give a person the opportunity to respond.

2. God requires a decision and waits for a response.

After God speaks to His people He asks for a decision and then He graciously and patiently waits for a response. Notice how this worked out when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal. The prophet first used tough love by verbally confronting the people and then asked them to make a decision. Elijah asked, "*How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.*" But the people answered him not a word" (1 Kings 18:21). Then the prophet confronted the idolaters so that the people had sufficient time to make their decision. The Lord doesn't say choose and then the moment someone refuses to choose He drops the hammer on them. No, He gives people "*time to repent*" as

He did with the church of Thyatira and their sin of adultery (Rev. 2:21).

Patiently waiting is where tough love becomes difficult on the person exercising it, because we usually all want an immediate response. However, tough love waits and hopes that the words of correction will take hold of the heart. Tough love waits for a correct decision to be made so that change may occur. Asking for a decision and waiting is the way God shows people grace in the midst of their sin.



Could tough love restore your marriage and family again?

One of the best examples of where the Lord required change and then waited patiently is when He spoke to the church of Laodicea. He saw their great spiritual need and told them He wanted them either hot or cold. He counseled them to seek His righteousness and repent of their self-sufficiency. Then Jesus ended with: "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me*" (Rev. 3:15-20). Notice that it was love that motivated Jesus to verbally rebuke His people and yet love also waited at the door for them to hear His voice and respond.

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

3. God takes indirect action.

But, when there is no response to His gentle reproof God then takes indirect action to correct His people. Some of the indirect action that God chooses is hard to handle, but He has one purpose in mind, to bring that wayward soul back to Him. God takes indirect action by first dealing with the things or circumstances around the rebellious person. For example sometimes the Lord will simply withhold His blessings as He did by not giving rain to the Israelites so their crops would die (Deut. 11:17). This indirect action would have shown the people their need and hopefully turn their hearts back to Him.

Now you may be thinking, *Is correction really a sign of God's love?* Remember, God is the one who said, *"For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives"* (Heb. 12:6). Therefore, tough love corrects those it loves by withholding what it intended to give (Matt. 13:58; Haggai 1:7-11).

4. God takes direct action.

When God's words, patience and indirect correction fail to produce the change necessary, then God's tough love increases. He now deals directly with His sinning child. He will bring direct correction and allow the consequences of a person's rebellion to come upon them. Again, God takes direct action to correct His people because He possesses an enduring love that desires the best for them (Ps. 84:11).

If men are to respect God and His Word then He must hold them accountable to the covenant they have made with Him. God doesn't beg or force people, because these actions never produce a decision based in love. If God did use force or begging to change people they would be motivated by fear or guilt to follow Him, not love. There is only one thing God wants from mankind: a decision to have a relationship based in love. Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5, which expressed the desire of God's heart: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"* (Matt. 22:37). But, His love never forces or twists someone's arm to make them love Him. All men must come freely and voluntarily because of love.

An example of God's direct correction is that instead of simply withholding His

blessings from the Israelites He now brings direct correction by allowing Israel to be defeated by her enemies (Jer. 30:14). Another example of direct correction is when God destroyed the crops of His people by using mildew and hail (Hag. 2:17).

5. God ultimately gives the person over to their own desires.

The final step of God's tough love is to allow a person or nation to completely go their own way. God declared that the Israelites had come to this point when He said, *"In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction"* (Jer. 2:30). He then allowed the nation to experience the consequences of their choices, be removed from their land, and go into captivity. Why? Because in His love He will not force a person to respond to Him nor will He continually pursue or beg someone to follow His will. This is why God eventually *"forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh"* (Ps. 78:60). Why? The Lord said, *"But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels"* (Ps. 81:11-12). It is a sad commentary on what happens to those who stubbornly walk in rebellion, but it is reality.

For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.

When you read the New Testament you will find that Jesus used the same tough love with those who resisted Him. He first sought to correct the Pharisees' by verbally reproving them through His teaching. He then waited three and a half years for their decision to repent. Finally, Jesus declared to them: *"Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"* (Luke 13:35). In other words, His final message to them was, I'm leaving you to your own devices, but if you ever want to see me again you must acknowledge that I have come in the name of the Lord. The Jews as a nation will one day acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah (Ps. 118:26; Zech. 12:10).

Remember, judgment is always God's last resort as He declared through the Prophet Ezekiel: *"'For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,' says the Lord God. 'Therefore turn and live!'"* (Eze. 18:32). God's desire is that His people turn and live, not die. But, He has also declared that there are consequences to sinful and rebellious behavior. His tough love works and labors to draw men to Himself until as He declared there is *"no remedy"* (2 Chron. 36:15-16).

Should God's people also use tough love?

The answer to this question is a resounding yes! Jesus said, *"For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you"* (John 13:15). Husbands, wives, parents, and all people must use tough love with one another when sinful behavior persists in these relationships. You are being conformed into the image of Christ, and therefore, you should ask Him to help you respond lovingly and yet firmly to those who persist in unloving or ungodly behavior. Now let's apply tough love to some of the serious problems that occur in marriage.

How do you exercise tough love?

To begin with, let me first say that any of the practical guidance I'm about to give you must be taken and applied with prayer and the confirming counsel of your pastor. There are many varied circumstances that must be taken into account as you apply the following advice. Allow your pastor or counselor to read this article and help you work through the specific strategies you will take with your spouse.

1. A harsh or unloving spouse.

Begin by sitting down with your spouse at an opportune time when you are alone and verbally express your love and desire to change your marriage. I know that this is difficult to do because you don't want to start a conflict, but this is where tough love must always begin. Encourage him or her to think back to times when things were better and happier between you. Ask for his or her input as to how the marriage might return to those days.

Next, seek reconciliation over any past unresolved issues between you. Ac-

knowledge your faults first before you point out your mate's shortcomings. I know this may be difficult, but tough love also requires you to take a hard look at yourself. The unresolved issues in your relationship may be partly your fault, and therefore, you must do what Jesus said, first examine yourself (Matt. 7:5).

In addition, make any changes that are necessary to stir up greater friendship, companionship, and intimacy with your mate (Matt. 7:12). Again, this is hard to do when you may believe that your spouse has caused most of the problems in your marriage. But, if you want change you must do whatever will promote change.

If there is no response after all of your verbal encouragement and your own practical change, wait a period of time and have the same conversation again. This is the example the Lord set in dealing with the Israelites. Read Psalms 106 for an example of God speaking over and over again to His people. Longsuffering and patient loving reproof is at the heart of tough love.

But, I know what you are thinking right now, *What should I do if all these approaches fail and there is no change?* This is when you bring in the outside help of a friend or an elder of your church to intervene. Doing this is an indirect way of allowing others to encourage or reprove your spouse. The biblical basis for this step is revealed in Matthew 18:15-17. In this passage Jesus taught His disciples that when a conflict would arise between two people the first step was for the offended person to go to the other alone and explain the offense. If that failed to bring repentance and change, he should take another person with him and try again. If this approach failed to bring any change then you should take the last step of asking your pastor to go with you to approach him or her. At this time your spouse has a serious decision to make. Will he or she respond to God's voice or reject it. If your spouse rejects the encouragement and reproof of your pastor, Jesus said that this person is to be considered a heathen or a non-Christian.

Tough love at this point means that you must choose to live peaceably with your spouse as long as he or she is pleased to dwell with you (1 Cor. 7:12-13). This is what Paul declared should be the behavior of all believers that are treated un-

fairly by others: *"If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men"* (Rom. 12:18). In this case, *all men* would include your spouse. If your spouse is not pleased to dwell with you, Paul declared, "Let him depart" (1 Cor. 7:15). For a more extensive look at dealing with an uncooperative spouse please refer to appendix A in my book, *Married and How To Stay That Way*.

2. An addicted spouse.

When dealing with a spouse who is addicted to drugs or alcohol you should first exercise all my previous counsel with the following additions. When you have your conversation with your spouse, tough love will require you to strongly encourage drug or alcohol treatment. Requiring some formal treatment is especially important if detoxification is necessary. In addition, you should require your spouse to begin counseling with your pastor or someone in your church who has a ministry to addicts. Then wait for your spouse to give you a decision. Are they willing to take these actions? It is essential that they do because very few individuals break their drug or alcohol habits by themselves. There are specific reasons why your spouse drinks or uses drugs. He or she must talk to someone so it can be determined why the decision has been made to turn to these substances to find relief and peace instead of seeking the Prince of Peace.

For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.

If your spouse chooses to get treatment and begins to go to counseling it is best to wait to see the results of these steps. Even though there will be times of temptation or even set backs when he or she falls into old habits, tough love endures. However, if their substance abuse does not change or creates a safety issue for you or your children, you may have to temporarily remove yourself or your mate from the home (Ps. 12:5). If you must remove yourself or your spouse it is a clear indicator to your mate that you will not allow his or her behavior to destroy your life and the lives of your children. However, leaving the home should always to be your last option.

3. An abusive spouse.

When there is physical or sexual abuse occurring in a marriage the need for action on the part of the abused partner is essential. Physical or sexual abuse is a crime, and therefore, is never to be excused, rationalized away, or allowed to continue. I would encourage you to first go to www.covenantkeepers.org and read the article entitled, *Dealing with an Abusive Spouse*. This article will give you more specific encouragement and detailed instruction for this serious situation.

Safety for you and your children is again the most important issue for you to consider. Don't fool yourself into thinking it can't get any worse than it is. Yes, it can get worse! An abusive person is one that is out of control and is a very real threat to you. He or she does not control their desires, anger, impulses, or decisions. You are the one who must take control of your life and make the right decisions. You need to remove yourself or have your spouse removed from the home because this is not a safe situation.

Tough love may also require you to take direct legal action to obtain a restraining order if your spouse threatens your life or to abduct your children. Action such as this is clearly within your right as a believer. Scripture teaches that when there is a crime such as murder, rape, or incest disclosed to you or someone threatens you with such offenses you should go to the police. These acts are not only an offense against God and His Word, but they are a violation of the laws of our land. Moses encouraged people to report crimes like these to the judges of the land (Lev. 20:1-5; Deut. 13:6-8). Reporting a crime will allow the natural consequences of your spouse's behavior to come upon them. It is also important to note that Paul appealed to the authority of a Roman Centurion when he found out that men had threatened to kill him (Acts 23:12-22). He also appealed to Caesar when he was unjustly treated in a court of law (Acts 25:11). Therefore, protect yourself if you are threatened with all the legal help available to you.

4. An adulterous spouse.

If your spouse has just announced that he or she is having a sexual relationship with someone or you suspect that it is occurring, what should you do? What are your alternatives? You can plead, cry, beg, nag, or go along with his or her sin-

ful behavior. However, all these alternatives will only cause your mate to lose respect for you and will only embolden them to further sinful behavior. Your only alternative is to treat your spouse the way God did the children of Israel. What did He do?

God verbally confronted the Israelites with their spiritual adultery and ungodliness in the hope that there might be reconciliation. He made it clear that they must turn from their behavior if they wanted their relationship with Him to continue (Jer. 29:23). Remember, this is always where tough love begins. Explain to your spouse that the most fundamental requirement for resolving the issues in the marriage is that the adulterous relationship must cease. If your mate wants to save his or her marriage this must be the first step.

Then God explained the destruction and tribulation that would occur as a result of their adultery (Rev. 2:2). You must do the same. Help your mate to understand that divorce will bring pain and destruction to the entire family.

The Lord then confirmed His love and waited to see their response (Jer. 31:3). If there is no repentance and a turning away from the adulterous relationship then this behavior is proof that a decision has been made to continue in the adultery. Don't listen to the words of repentance; look for the action that the relationship has been cut off. If it is not, then separation and divorce is the only alternative. Taking such action is always when you have exhausted all options and there is no remedy to be found (2 Chron. 36:15-16). Notice the warning God gave to adulterous Judah of impending divorce just as He had already done with the Northern kingdom of Israel. The Lord warned Judah: *"Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these things, 'Return to Me.' But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also... And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense"* (Jer. 3:6-10). What a sad commentary on the nature of mankind that,

like the land of Judah, we don't seem to learn the lessons of others and force God to correct us.

Remember, tough love always begins with speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Tough love never is harsh or offensive when it speaks, but will always be strong and yet kind in its stand for what is right (1 Cor. 13:4). Tough love never forces, plays games, manipulates, or begs. Even when your tough love is resisted and you allow the consequences of your mate's actions to come upon them, you must still be gracious and ready to forgive if they change their mind and turn from their sinful behavior (Ps. 86:5). Love must be the basis for all your actions when using tough love. May God give you grace to always stand for what is right and good and to do so with His enduring love. For further insight into this subject please read, *Love Must Be Tough* by James Dobson, Word Books.

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For more information concerning the ministry of Pastor Steve Carr or for additional marriage resources for couples and counselors, please contact us at our web site www.covenantkeepers.org or by email at ccag@calvaryag.org or at 805-481-2320.

Additional Resources

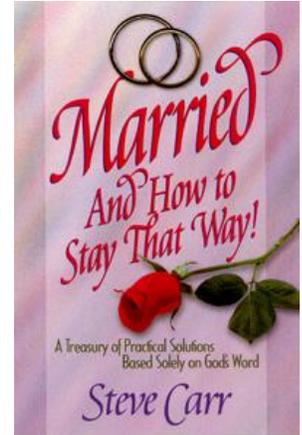
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