COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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Why Can't We Talk Anymore?

Many times, couples ask this question during marriage counseling. They declare, "We just can't talk things through like we used to! When we first dated, we could talk for hours, but now it's a major struggle. What is wrong?"

Have you ever wondered why, over time, your ability to communicate with your spouse takes a turn for the worse? If you are reading this article right now, it probably means that you are struggling with communication with your mate. You must realize that there are specific reasons why your ability to talk with each other has changed. These issues must be identified and resolved if you want to see lasting change take place. If these issues are left unresolved, you will drift farther apart, and your struggle to talk will only increase. Let's look at some of the "big picture" issues concerning why things change, and then we will examine the specific things you are doing that can hinder your ability to communicate with your spouse.

First, why over time, do things change in the way you communicate with your spouse?

There are two major reasons the dynamics have changed in your ability to talk with one another. The first is that when you began dating you were on your best behavior. You were trying to be kind, and respectfully listen, and not interrupt your prospective marriage partner. You were also infatuated with your prospective spouse. Now you don't need to make a good impression. This is why you have now formed bad habits in the way you speak to one another.

The second reason why things have changed in your communication relates to the way you resolve conflicts. When you first dated you had very few disagreements, because you didn't know each other that well. This ignorance of each other's quirky habits made for few conflicts, which made it easy to talk to each other. But today, you know many of your mate's bad habits, and these have created many conflicts. When these conflicts remain unresolved, and they happen over and over again, this creates hardness of heart and unforgiveness. It is important to remember that unforgiveness and hardness of heart are the very reasons why Jesus said people get divorced. Jesus was asked, *"'Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?' He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so'"* (Matt. 19:7-8).

Therefore, the first issue you should address is the condition of your heart. Is it hard, or tender? Is your heart humble or prideful? The condition of your heart will affect everything in your marriage, especially your ability to communicate.

So, how can you change the way you communicate when things aren't going well in your marriage? You must focus on three issues! As you continue to read, please take a personal inventory of the way *you* communicate. Where you realize you have failed over a specific issue, write it down, and I will explain what to do with it at the end of this article.

Deal with your attitudes!

First, you must deal with your attitudes. We can all sense a person's attitude before they finish their first sentence. Their attitude will tell you immediately whether a person is happy, sad, or angry and resentful. If a person has a bad attitude, you will immediately become guarded and defensive. Your mate's attitude will either keep your heart open to hear what they have to say, or if they have a bad attitude, it will instantly close the door to your heart.

When you sense your spouse is coming at you with one of the bad attitudes, I am about to list, stop the conversation and first address the attitude before you continue talking. Why is this essential? Because this is exactly what Scripture encourages you to do. Solomon wrote, *"It is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel"* (Prov. 20:3). Solomon also taught, *"Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out"* (Prov. 17:14 - NIV). Note that God's Word tells you to *stop* the conversation, and to *drop the matter* before you get into a full-scale argument. If you don't do this, the dam will be breached and a torrent of uncontrolled emotions and words will come out of your mouth, and you will only make the problem worse. The calm one needs to stop the conversation on the spot, and encourage a time of prayer and then to come back together in a few minutes with the right attitude.

The condition of your heart will affect everything in your marriage, especially your ability to communicate.

What are some bad attitudes? As you read through these examples, stop and think, *Is this the way I come off toward my spouse?* Then compare your attitude with what Scripture teaches.

1. Do you come with an arrogant attitude when you speak? Do you say, "I know what I'm talking about, and you don't?" Solomon declared, *"In the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise will preserve them"*

(Prov. 14:3). If you speak pridefully the Bible says that you are a fool.

2. Do you have an authoritarian attitude when you speak? Do you say things like, "This is the way we are doing this, whether you like it or not?" Solomon wrote, *"By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone"* (Prov. 25:15). In other words, you should try to persuade your spouse with gentle words, because these words are more powerful than breaking someone's arm to force your will.

3. Do you have a resentful or bitter attitude, demonstrated by sarcastic remarks and bringing up some past perceived injustice? Speaking to one another in this manner will only poison your relationship, and if you speak to others about your conflict, it will also poison the relationship your spouse has with that person. A resentful bitter attitude is the source of all gossip in the church. When Peter spoke to the man who tried to buy the gift of laying on of hands, he revealed to him the source of his problem when he said, *"For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity"* (Acts 8:23). Don't let bitterness and resentment poison your ability to talk things through with your spouse. Choose to forgive!

4. Do you have a disrespectful attitude that is revealed by belittling, interrupting, or calling your mate names? If you speak to your spouse this way you are disobeying both Paul and Peter's advice. Paul commanded both husbands and wives, *"Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband*" (Eph. 5:33). After Peter taught wives to respect their husbands, he also commanded the husbands, *"Likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered"* (1 Peter 3:7). Being respectful in your speech and behavior is one of the most fundamental aspects of real love.

5. Do you reveal an indifferent attitude by simply refusing to talk through issues? Indifference can also be demonstrated by refusing to listen to your spouse. If this is the way you relate to your spouse, this makes you just like the Pharisees in the way they dealt with Jesus and the apostles. Note how the religious leaders responded to Stephen. Luke records when Stephen tried to speak, *"Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord"* (Acts 7:57). Is this the action you take?

Change the words that you use!

The words that you choose to use when you communicate, will also determine whether or not you will be able to talk things through effectively. What do I mean?

1. Do you use harsh words, such as, "I hate you," or, "You are such an idiot? Solomon warned his own son that, *"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"* (Prov. 15:1). If there is a lot of anger between you and your spouse, then one or both of you are speaking to each other in harsh ways. This is why you can't talk through issues that divide you, and accomplish real harmony. If you are the one with the anger problem, I would encourage you to read chapter 7 in my book, *"Winning Your Personal Battles"* to learn how to overcome your anger issues.

Don't let bitterness and resentment poison your ability to talk things through with your spouse. Choose to forgive!

2. Do you use lying words? Lying is when you omit certain facts to make you look better during a conflict. Lying also occurs when you twist your mate's words so you can win the argument or when you exaggerate certain facts. There are many ways to lie. The psalmist prayed, *"Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue"* (Ps. 120:2). Ask God to deliver you and your mate from lying lips. Remember, the Holy Spirit is called the *"Spirit of truth"* (John 14:17). Therefore, truth is the only thing a true believer should be speaking.

3. Do you use hateful words to insult or demean your mate, because they have done something to hurt you? King David wrote, *"They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, and fought against me without a cause"* (Ps. 109:3). Hateful words will only continue the destruction of your marriage. Instead choose to speak kindly, you will accomplish so much more (Prov. 19:22; Prov. 31:26).

4. Do you use swear words toward your spouse when you are in the midst of an argument? If you do, this is like throwing gasoline on the fire, it will only cause the anger in your mate to be enflamed. Paul warned the believers at Ephesus, *"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers"* (Eph. 4:29).

5. Do you use words of exaggeration when you are discussing responsibility during a conflict? Do you declare, "*You always* do this *every time* we have a disagreement?" Or, do you tell your mate, "*You never* do what I ask?" When you use these words of exaggeration your spouse will immediately bring up the one time, they did do what you say they never do. Then the disagreement gets diverted from of the actual offense, and now you are arguing about how often the offense takes place. Rather, *"speak the truth in love,"* which would be to say, "many times" or "often" this occurs (Eph. 4:15).

6. Do you use condemning words, by pointing out your mate's past failures? When you are condemning another, this means that you have unforgiveness in your heart. This is why Jesus put these issues together when He taught, *"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven"* (Luke 6:37). Be merciful and forgive, and condemning words will not come from your lips.

7. Do you refuse to speak, so you can give your spouse the silent treatment in an attempt to punish them? Usually, people become silent and refuse to respond, because they have either given up, they just don't communicate well, or they are trying to manipulate you. Whatever the reason for not responding, silence will only continue to destroy your relationship. God declared many times in Scripture as to

why the nation Israel was destroyed. He once said, *"I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded"* (Prov. 1:24). My encouragement is to obey God's command to speak the truth in love, and then listen to your spouse!

Change your behaviors!

There are certain learned behaviors that you choose to use that will also destroy your ability to have a normal conversation. What are some of these?

1. Are you an interrupter or a sentence finisher when you talk with your spouse? Allowing this behavior into your conversations will only frustrate the spouse who is less verbal, and won't allow them a chance to speak up. Being an interrupter can easily inflate a mild disagreement into a major argument. Don't do it. You need to be quiet and listen more. Solomon said, *"He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him"* (Prov. 18:13). The word *folly* means stupid. Therefore, don't make this stupid mistake!

Hateful words will only continue the destruction of your marriage.

2. Do you aggressively attack your spouse verbally during a conflict, and get right up in their face? This behavior is only fanning the flames of an argument, and has a high potential for escalation into a physical confrontation. Scripture warns us about this kind of behavior when it declares, *"If you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!"* (Gal. 5:15). Don't let your anger consume your marriage!

3. Do you run to another room to attempt to avoid dealing with a conflict? This behavior is equally as disastrous as aggressively attacking your spouse. Scripture also commands us to resolve issues each day before the sun goes down. Paul commanded believers to, *"'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath"* (Eph. 4:26). Are you being obedient to this command?

4. Do you attempt to dominate the conversation during a conflict so that your spouse can't respond? This behavior is simply over talking the issue, which hinders your spouse from expressing their thoughts. Jesus told His disciples concerning prayer that this kind of behavior would also not work with Him, and was a fruitless endeavor. Jesus said, *"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words"* (Matt. 6:7).

5. Do you use yelling, anger, and wrath thinking that this is how you can get your spouse to do what you want? If you behave in this manner, this only drives your mate further away from you. Why? Because it frustrates your spouse and shuts down any constructive dialog. The Apostle James said, *"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God"* (James 1:19-20). Your wrath will not get you the result that you are looking for.

6. Do you intentionally try to provoke your mate in order to purposely get them angry, just so you can blame them and get the upper hand in the argument? If you use this tactic, you may win the argument, but you are losing the battle to save your marriage. God's Word warns us to, *"Consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works"* (Heb. 10:24 - KJV). We all know how to provoke someone to wrath, but do you know how to provoke your spouse to love and good works?

7. Do you bring up your mate's past failures to silence them and win the argument? If you stoop to this level of combativeness, you only prove that you have never truly forgiven these past issues. Jesus said, *"Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses"* (Mark 11:25-26). Jesus means what He teaches here!

8. Are you a blame-shifter when the conversation turns to your faults during a conflict? Shifting the blame to your spouse or to someone else will only guarantee that there will be no true reconciliation. Remember that in the Garden of Eden that Adam blamed God, and his wife for his failure. Then Eve turned and blamed the devil (Gen. 3:9-13). How did that work out for them? For true forgiveness and reconciliation, both husband and wife must acknowledge their own faults (Matt. 7:5).

What can you do to change these bad habits?

1. Make a list of the attitudes, words, and behaviors where you are failing.

2. Acknowledge to God and your spouse that you understand these attitudes and behaviors to be sinful. Healing can only begin with this kind of honest confession. James commanded all believers to, *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16). If you don't realize that each of these issues are sinful behaviors, you will never see the need to change them.

Being an interrupter can easily inflate a mild disagreement into a major argument.

3. Attack these issues in your own life, instead of attacking your mate. Take each issue to God in prayer, surrender to Him, and ask Him to fill you with the Holy Spirit to begin the changes within you that are necessary.

4. Determine a creative way to replace these behaviors so you can solve these communication issues. I would suggest reading chapter 10 in my book *"Married and How To Stay That Way"* for further insights into the steps you need to take to solve these disagreements.

How do you replace these sinful behaviors with godly ones? Here are some examples of simple replacement behaviors. Instead of walking controlled by your flesh, replace these behaviors by being filled with the Holy Spirit. This is where all transformation begins. Remember, Paul taught, *"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh"* (Gal. 5:16). The Holy Spirit is the only person who can

actually change any of these behaviors within you that I have discussed in this article. Therefore, instead of yelling and screaming at each other, replace this behavior by stopping the conversation and taking a time out to calm down so you can examine your own faults. Instead of allowing a bad attitude to fester inside you, replace this behavior with first getting your own heart right before God, and then going to speak the truth in love.

Remember, communication is the key to a better marriage. However, many have never learned this skill, or obeyed many of these commands. Allow the Lord to change the way you speak to your spouse, and watch good things begin to happen in your marriage!

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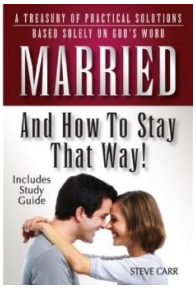
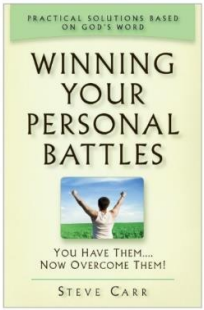
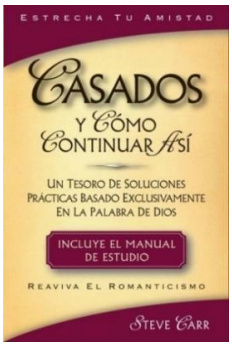
Married And How To Stay That Way: (New updated version includes study guide.) This book is available in paperback through the author if you email me at scarrck@lightspeed.net. It is also available in paperback at Amazon.com, or Amazon Kindle, and as an audiobook.



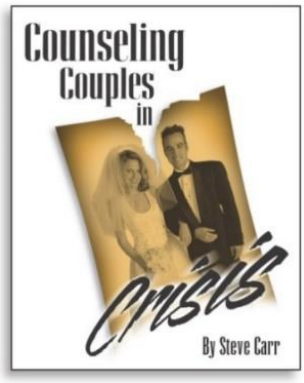
Winning Your Personal Battles: This is an invaluable resource that deals with the common struggles we all battle with throughout our lives. The issues covered in this book are the complicating problems that always seem to frustrate your marriage and other relationships. This book is available in paperback through the author if you email me at scarrck@lightspeed.net. It is also available in paperback at Amazon.com, or Amazon Kindle, and as an audiobook.



Spanish Edition of *Married and How To Stay That Way!* (Study Guide included). This book is available in paperback through the author if you email me at scarrck@lightspeed.net. It is also available in paperback at Amazon.com, or Amazon Kindle, and as an audiobook.



Counselor Training Manual: The *Counseling Couples in Crisis* manual with accompanying video training material has been developed for pastors and lay counselors to assist them to counsel couples in crisis. This manual is only available through the author at scarrck@lightspeed.net.



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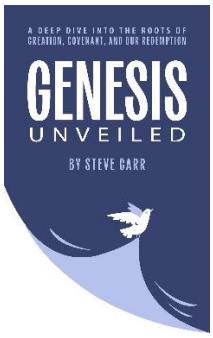

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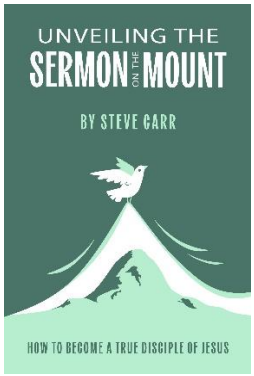
Unveiling the Sermon on the Mount is available only on Amazon.com, with a print on demand option, a Kindle version, and as an audiobook.



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