

The Conflict

5.2 – 6.13

(Studies Eight—Ten)

Study Eight

The Problem: Carelessness (5.2-8)

I. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. What was the most serious or most chronic (ongoing) area of conflict in your parents' marriage? What is it in your own, if you are married?
2. What style of facing or resolving conflicts did you observe in your parental home, and now in your own (if that applies)?
3. What did you notice about the king's address to her in 5.2? What word is missing, and why?
4. What is the source of the disagreement in 5.3? How common and how serious is the attitude you observe in this verse?
5. What are some common consequences of "fights"? How can a comparison of the last two lines of 5.6 with 2.14 help you in understanding consequences?
6. Why does the role of the watchmen seem to change from 3.3 to 5.7?
7. What avenues of response were open to her after he had departed? Which one did she select and why?

The Quest (for more understanding)

1. As a way of summarizing the first half of our study, share one or two things that you have learned from the Centrepiece section, and one or two from the Courtship section. What adjustments have you made in your attitudes or actions because of the studies so far?
2. How do people usually deal with problems in the books and magazines you read, and in the lives that you observe on the large screen and the small screen?
3. Conflict is both a bother and a blessing! Think through and discuss in your group how conflict can sometimes actually be a blessing to a marriage!



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☞
"Thanks for the marriage counseling, Pastor. We feel much better."

II. REFLECTION

Clearly the Song of Solomon is not a fairy tale. Sometime after the wedding night (probably not the next night), she has a recurring dream that reveals a disappointing truth: they did not “live happily ever after...”

The issue triggering the disagreement also seems to be a recurring one. He has come in very late, head already drenched with dew, anticipating some (sexual) attention. So far she has been attracted to him as a lover and has enjoyed learning bedroom language; but she is far more anxious about his role as king and her calling as queen to learn throne room language (she is still slowly learning all that is involved with his vocation as king. Prince Charles and Princess Diana appeared to have had the same adjustment problems...)

She would have been ready for him perhaps at 9.00 or 11.00 but this late, when he’s been preoccupied with running an empire? He did not have a cell phone, but couldn’t he have sent a servant saying he would be “a bit late”? When he finally comes, wet with evening dew, he piles up four affectionate phrases, but leaves out “bride.” He had used this six times on the wedding night, but now the seventh, the complete and perfect one, is missing! He is not about to demand or force his marital rights.

Thankfully, since most of us live in marriages that fall short of perfection from time to time, it is somehow comforting to know theirs was not perfect, either. And another definition of marriage comes to mind: it is a lifelong commitment to another sinner.

A common sentiment about this passage is that it seems to be a large disagreement over a small issue. Why spend two full chapters on a discarded robe and dirty feet? But there is a clue in the pronouns! Six times in one verse (5.3) she uses “I” or “my” and appears to have a serious case of “I” trouble! She just can not be bothered, and has slipped into carelessness.

Perhaps we can recall the large arguments resulting from the misplacement of a very small ring of car keys... or the slight skip in the recording of a favourite concerto... or the pain of a very small tooth in an otherwise healthy body. I remember so well the poster of a huge oak tree containing this caption, “The oak will stand firm against wind, and rain, and storm, but will be destroyed by a small wood beetle....” It is sad but true that the three main killers of the “marital oak”: adultery, various forms of abuse, and various kinds of addictions often can be traced to the wood beetle of a piece of burned toast...

He retreats after getting no response and leaves a little aromatic love note on the small ledge by the handle on her side of the door. She gets up, much too late, and finds him gone.

The consequences of conflict are fascinating. The last two lines in verse 6: “I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer” describe the results so well: distance and silence. This is especially hurtful since they had worked so hard in courtship to avoid just this: “Show me your face, let me hear your voice” (2.14).

If you are in a “normal” marital relationship it may surprise you that these words were written 3,000 years ago! Perhaps you remember the time after your last “difference of opinion” and the husband’s need to putter in the workshop or watch lots of sports

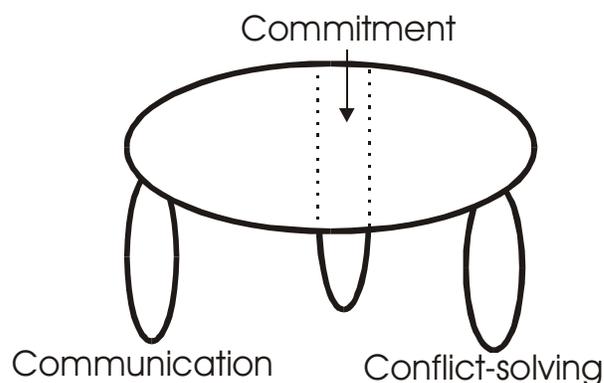
on the telly, or the wife's hiding in kitchen or garden, or needing to see long-lost friends...

The language of affection, so effective for the very young and the very old, often gets lost in the years in between. Couples under strain will use the language of information ("Your mother left a message for you this morning,") or persuasion, ("Will you pick up the kids from day care tomorrow?"), and avoid the language of affection.

The watchmen who are so supportive in her first dream now seem hostile. They confuse her with a prostitute dressed in a cloak, and beat her up. It seems that if we are wrong with our mate, we are often wrong with the world. In our last verse she begins to seek out help.

Now our marital issues are probably not the same as theirs!! According to numerous surveys, the top three areas in our marriages which cause more heat than light are relationships with the in-laws, financial concerns and sexual expectations. The same principles for making some progress still apply though, and we present them like the three legs of a milk stool.

If any of the three legs are missing, the stool will be wobbly. But if we are agreed on all three legs, we can relax on a couple stools and work through almost any issue.



In order to minimize the damage of disagreement, and even have conflict serve to strengthen your marital friendship, Cathy and I offer the following seven tips:

1. Set an appointment for conflict resolution, agreeing on a place to confront the issue (away from the kids) and a time to do so (Ephesians 4.26-27 suggests before sunset, so this could mean an occasional all-nighter!).
2. Select a posture for handling conflict, such as facing one another while holding hands and eyes, and reducing our volume. It is quite a challenge to argue in whispers! The holding of hands suggests that abuse is clearly not an option, and the wife-beating still all too common in our world is simply the resort of the weak.
3. Seek out an attitude of humility for ourselves: a prayerful willingness to learn and to change. And seek out compassion for the other: listening lots and interrupting little, remembering the divine gift to us all of two ears and one mouth.
4. Share the conversational and conflict patterns that we grew up with. How did our parents face, or choose not to face, controversial areas? What were the main areas of conflict that we remember from our childhood home?
5. State the problem or issue in one sentence, and then ask our partner to restate it in a way that makes sense to us. Continue this pattern back and forth to ensure good listening, and to avoid the "stop talking while I'm interrupting!" You can also use this in stating a preferred solution in one sentence and see if this moves things along.
6. Switch from "you" to "me" language and "own" our responses. Using "you always" or "you never" accusing language tends to close doors (and makes us defensive), whereas "when you....I feel..." language can open windows. Another way to put

this truth: “You” language tends to build walls, whereas “I” language builds bridges. We need to create the freedom and space our partner needs to change, if and when needed.

7. Store some key phrases in your conflict arsenal in preparation for the next “dust up” or “flare up”. We suggest three. “I am sorry, would you forgive me?” are not the seven last words on the cross, but can sometimes feel almost as painful... The second is its companion, “I forgive you and I will not hold _____ against you,” and the third is a statement in words of your intention and resolve to change attitude x or action y. The church needs far more gardeners resolved to grow the fruits of repentance.

III. RESOURCES

A. The Nature of Conflict

As a small group,

1. Discuss this definition of conflict: “Conflict is differences that can create distances”¹ or this statement: “Conflict is a proof of love.”
2. What causes conflict?
3. Is conflict a “bother or a blessing”? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Write the groups’ findings on the board and add any missing from the list below:

Some Causes of Conflict Resulting from differences about:
Goals
Values
Beliefs
What I know
What I feel
How I interpret the facts
How committed

Some advantages of conflict:

- ♦ Brings things into the open and prevents “gunny sacking” - keeping things bottled inside
- ♦ “Making a person angry is the surest way to find out what s/he care about and how deeply s/he cares.”

5. In two’s try this experiment in “fighting about nothing”.
 - a. Have the two people face each other almost touching toes. Now have one move back until they have reached a “safe distance.” Mark this with tape or chalk.
 - b. Now have the other person do the same.
 - c. Compare the markings.
 - d. Talk about the differences spouses (or individuals) may have in wanting to be together (or need for touching) and needing time apart (to pursue hobbies or other interests).

Each person, even in a marriage, has different needs for space.

- e. Sometimes couples will quarrel after lovemaking. The mate who needs more space will often start the “fight” to re-establish a comfortable distance...

1. Dale and Dale, *Making Good Marriages Better*, p.92

B. Common Conflict Strategies by Thomas Kilman²

We all have different ways of dealing (or not dealing) with conflicts, arising out of our personalities and particular situations. In each conflict situation I decide how important my goals are compared to the importance of the relationship. Sometimes I need to re-evaluate my priorities.

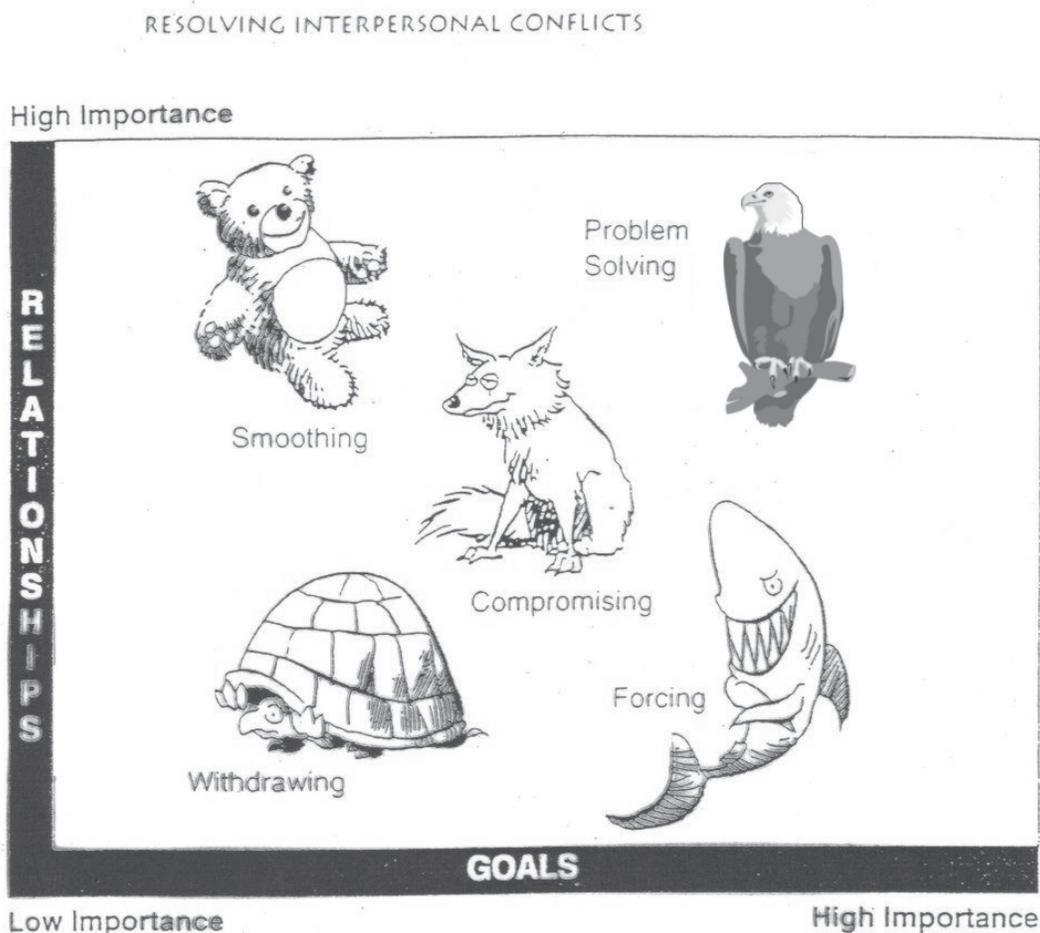


Figure 8.1 Conflict Strategies.

Johnson, David W(2000). *Reaching Out*. (Needham Heights, Ma: Allyn & Bacon.)

In the Johnson diagram, an owl is commonly used for the problem-solving corner. But we found that in Africa an owl had common negative or evil associations, so we switched birds and selected an eagle!

2. p. 242 Thomas-Kilman in Johnson, W. *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness...* (1997). Toronto: Allyn and Bacon.

C. Resolving Conflict

Conflict is a wonderful opportunity to work through issues about which we have strong feelings and find a creative solution that is good for both.

THREE COMMON (HEALTHY) STRATEGIES:

1. Search for a common point. (*What is the mutual point of agreement? What do we both want to come out of this?*) “Collaborative” approach
2. The *give-and-take* of bargaining is often constructive (particularly in the absence of a common point). “*Compromise*” approach – *quid pro quo* – *this for that* – “*plea bargaining*”
 - a. Define the issue (What is the problem exactly? Where do we disagree?)
 - b. How important is this to me? How deeply does this affect my life?
 - c. Negotiate a reasonable agreement.
3. If no common points are discovered and no bargains can be reached, *take turns* in experimenting with their favoured solutions. “*Accommodating*” approach.

“Submit to one another in love”

Developing a Win-Win Spirit for Resolving Conflict

1. “*Bridge-builders*” – “How can we solve this problem together? We need each other’s help here, don’t we?”
2. “*Negotiators*” – “What options have you thought of? What alternatives would you suggest?”
3. “*Table turners*” – “What would you do if you were me?”
4. “*Truth-tellers*” – “Where did you discover this information? Will you help me know as many facts about this matter as you seem to know?”
5. “*Understanding growers*” – “You obviously have some good reasons for taking this position. Will you share your thinking with me?”
6. “*Tolerance producers*” – “May I share my thoughts on another possible solution we haven’t mentioned yet?”
7. “*Time buyers*” – “May I think about this until tonight? Could we discuss it then?”
8. “*Disarmers*” – “Do you feel I can help us solve this problem?”

We need to ask ourselves, are we ever “unfair fighters”...?

Unhealthy Types of Marital Combatants – “Unfair Fighters”

- “*Withdrawal evaders*” – Not fighting is unfair fighting. “*Avoidance*” approach
- “*Professional Ego-Smashers*” – pestering and agitating until their target reacts, insulting and sometimes violent. “*Competitive*” approach
- “*Gunny sackers*” – score-keepers who smile and act as if everything is fine, meanwhile storing up hurts and disappointments; the sack gets so full that it bursts and surprises everybody
- “*Carom fighters*” – not open and direct : they do not confront directly, but ridicule or destroy an object or a person, or an idea their spouse values
- “*Double binders*” – create positive-negative binds. The spouse makes a positive suggestion or gives encouragement, then criticizes when the other acts on it: e.g. a wife urging husband to go fishing, then telling him his friends are “low-lives” and he stinks like a dead fish!
- “*Character analysis*” – “You’re just like your mother” – abuse of family members and history
- “*Gimmies*” – Never enough of anything to satisfy this person- more, bigger, better, newer (“Half-empty not half-full”)
- “*Wholders*” – “carrot on the end of the stick” – rationing out their approval, sex, money and concern

D. Conflict and its Relationship to Anger³

Sometimes we react in anger when we don’t get what we want. Can anger ever be positive? Yes, when we see others being hurt or taken advantage of. My anger can help me recognize that I have been hurt, although that hurt may be much deeper than the situation that triggers it...

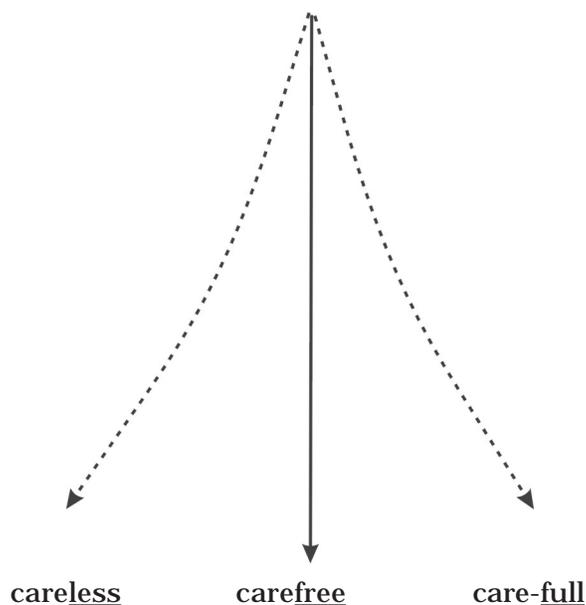
- Negative anger is concern only for ourselves, and can be hidden behind resentment, aggression (e.g. “road rage”), frustration, and hate. The problem with anger is that it communicates hatred or rejection to the one who is at the receiving end.
- We know the Bible warns against anger, although God Himself was righteously angry at the sin of his people. We are advised not to take anger to bed, because it gets buried in the unconscious and in the body. (Have you ever awakened with a headache? This may be unresolved anger.)
- We can react to anger by suppressing or repressing it – building a fence around it. But this damages us and those around us.
- We can express it – in writing to ourselves or by exercising our bodies, but we must be careful not to hurt others by verbalizing it.

3. Wright, H. Norman. *Communication: key to your marriage* (1995). Ventura, California: Regal Books, pp. 82-115.

- We can confess it in humility to a trusted friend or counsellor, prayerfully asking God's help to identify the causes of the anger and to heal us. We must take responsibility for our own emotion. We can learn how to confess in a way that does not make the other person feel responsible for our anger.
- Only when the anger is safely out of the way can we actually problem-solve our conflicts with our loved one.

IV. RESPONSE

- A. In a class or small group divide into real or imaginary couples and “solve” the following issues:
1. You have received an unexpected tax refund of 20,000 Rand (or the equivalent of US\$3,000 or perhaps 50 million Zimbabwean). You the husband want to make a serious down payment on a newer and more reliable vehicle, and you the wife want to purchase a couple of appliances and a sitting room chesterfield (sofa). What to do?
 2. The wife's parents are expecting you to visit on your annual two-week holiday, and you the wife agree. You the husband would rather take your family, including two small children, to the Indian Ocean seashore. What to do?
- B. The next time your heart tells you clearly that the two of you are “not on the same page”, follow all or some of the seven steps suggested above...
- C. How can we minimize the swings of the pendulum and live closer to the centre more and more?



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*Scripture references are from the
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from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

An M.D. friend told me one day of the very different ways people receive news of terminal illness. One man (of course my friend protected the anonymity of his patients) wailed over and over, "I can't leave Sarah! I can't leave Sarah!" Another man, in the same week, turned calmly to his wife and said, "Well, Mama, I'd better get those tires on your car."

What struck me was not just the difference in reaction, but also the similarity. Each thought first of the impact of his death on his spouse. In his crisis, he thought at once of hers.

Good marriages, said C. S. Lewis, require good people. Real love for another is something you do, not just something that happens to you. So marriage becomes a school of virtue, in which good people make a full turn toward each other in order to practice fidelity, which goes so much further than staying out of the wrong bed. Our colleague Mel Hugen used to say that fidelity to your spouse includes honoring him or her. Don't talk behind her back. Don't roll your eyes when he can't remember a punch-line. As a baseline, listen to your spouse respectfully. Ask about what interests your spouse so that her interests may become yours (except for pro wrestling). If you begin a sentence by saying, "You always . . .," then find a sunny way to end it.

Alas, by this good standard we are all unfaithful to one degree or another. It's not just our divorcing brothers and sisters who have broken a vow and lost their way.

But divorce does bring particular pain. Friends and fellow church members lose heart. The spouse who didn't want a divorce feels abandoned or, worse, betrayed. Children conclude that their family story is over. These sad facts make divorce tough to talk about in the church, because we have to talk there not just about our sin, but also about God's grace. We have to say that we can't out-sin God's costly grace. But who knows how much to talk about the sin and how much about the grace, and in what order? Who, except Jesus, knows how to approach human misery "full of grace and truth" in perfect blend?

Two things we do know. God hates divorce. God also hates hasty and uncharitable judgments about divorce. So maybe, at last, we are reminded how much we all need our Savior, whose grace heals the wounds caused by his truth.

Yours,

Neal Plantinga

Study Nine

The Process: Her Concern and Others' Contribution (5.9-6.3)

I. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. What is your normal response after a marital disagreement? Looking at the animal page of the resource section of our last study, which “animal” describes you, and would your partner agree?
2. If you are single, which friends have enough influence to affect your choice of boyfriend or girlfriend, or even eventually husband or wife?
3. If you are married, which person(s) or couple has access to your marriage, helping you to cope with small crises before they become large ones?
4. What is the intent of the two questions the court ladies ask in 5.9 and 6.1, and what is the bride’s response?
5. Why are questions often more effective than statements? Can you think of Scriptural examples and examples from your own experience?
6. What can you learn from the description of him in 5.10-16 (the “direction”, the number and the content)? Which item does she repeat, returning to it at the end, and why?
7. What can you learn from her response to the second question in 6.2-3?

The Quest (for more understanding)

1. What is the connection between a healthy courtship and a healthy marriage?
2. What are the links between appearance and character? How much importance should be attached to this comment, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression”?
3. If you have a special friend, fiancé(e) or marriage partner, try to write a “poem” (make a drawing or modest painting, or even a sculpture) based on his or her physical characteristics!

II. REFLECTION

A woman who had been married for more than thirty years told her husband, "I miss hearing you say that you love me. You hardly ever say those three special little words anymore." He thought a bit and slowly replied, "Well, I did say them on our wedding day, and if I ever change my mind, you'll be the first to know!"

Their marriage routines had developed into ruts, and some ruts are very hard to climb out of. Our girl in the Song could have responded in a number of ways after Solomon's late night visit. She could have been annoyed with Solomon's presumption, wondering, "Am I just another one of your thousands of subjects to whom you say "jump" and they instantly reply, "How high?" The king was quite demanding and unrealistic, after all... She could have justified her reaction in a number of ways, and started a search for sympathetic voices.

But no, she seeks for help, from the court ladies whom she could have viewed as competitors. Those of us who are counsellors or pastors would be wise to insist that a couple seek substantial help before their wedding, and perhaps after it as well.

The three "quicksand" times in a relationship that seem to swallow up too many couples are these. Courtship is the first, when one partner or both ignore warning signs in the hopes that "marriage will change things." It is so hard to accept that being married to no one is better than being married to the wrong one!

The second stretch seems to take place about seven years into the marriage, and the most common cry for help occurs in the sixth year: usually much too late!!

Finally, and surprisingly, the third quicksand stretch is the six to eighteen months after the last child leaves home. Persons who put parenting ahead of partnering find themselves at a loss for conversation and closeness...

Some American states, and church associations in some cities, require that couples have premarital instruction before their marriages are recognized. Cathy and I in normal circumstances ask to meet with a couple for ninety minutes each month for the six months prior to the wedding, and a final session six months after the wedding bells.

The daughter of a close friend in Canada (the friend had come to the Lord partly through our Rotary Club friendship) approached us with a young man asking that we marry them. After three hours and more than three cups of coffee, we sensed clearly that they were not ready, and we told them so. A week later they were married by a local justice of the peace (we attended in order to convey that we were for them, but against their wedding and its timing). The marriage lasted seven months.

We need friends with the courage to say, "Your friend is not the right choice for you, or at least not yet." We need friends who have the gift of asking good questions. We would like the idea to catch on of assigning an older mentoring couple to each new married couple for at least the first year of their life together.

Solomon's bride had the gift of friends who knew how to ask good questions! They ask about her attitude in 5.9 and about her actions in 6.1. Interesting it is that six of the eleven questions in this Song are mentioned in this conflict section...

1. The court ladies ask about her attitude. "How is your beloved better than others..." they query twice, asking her to remember her courtship and early marital experiences, and asking her to step back and see the larger picture. They do not yield to the temptation to take sides, or sympathize with her grumpy feelings. Good

counsellors are not for one partner and against the other, but are for the marriage. They will work to make it better.

She moves away from her own hurt and wounded pride and focuses on him in a ten-fold parade of affirmation. She starts with his head and moves downward to his legs before summarizing his overall appearance, and then returns to his mouth in verse 16. His ability to refrain from harsh words, raised volume, and demeaning name-calling was something she really needed and appreciated. Cathy tells me that harsh speech is one of the most effective ways I have of losing her attention, and affection...

So the girl in our Song affirms in smiling “bookends” that “he is outstanding among ten thousand... and he is altogether lovely, my lover and my friend” (5.10, 16). Let’s not pass over that word “friend” too quickly! In one African country we visited in 2006, a large number of married persons were asked to name their closest friend. Only a small minority named their mates! Of even more concern, the same people (in this case, the men) were asked if they would first rescue a wife or a cow caught in a ditch. And the animals won...

And she may have started wondering: since he is so wonderful, what am I doing making speeches here? When the heart is once again right, the footsteps will follow!



Cathy and I have found that a valuable resource in our counselling experience is to ask a couple to reflect on their courtship: Why did you choose him? Why did you fall in love with her?

Quite often he doesn't act the same way, and she doesn't look the same way, after the wedding. Courtship is for the man a "hunt", and when the deer or moose has been pursued and shot and "dressed" (obviously this analogy should not be carried too far...) he goes on to other areas of conquest, especially in his chosen vocation.

And the woman, having shown him only her best in romantic evenings of courtship, is now often attired in ways he can scarcely recognize. The curlers and face cream and ratty robe and crying children may give him pause and make him wonder if he really said "I do" to all that. I remember a university student telling me, shortly after she was engaged, that "I cannot wait for the wedding day, so that I can finally relax and be myself..."

The court ladies would probably convey this counsel: to succeed, a marriage must be a growing, ongoing courtship.

2. So they now suggest some action. Cleverly they do not say either "We'll go and fetch him for you. Just wait right here," or "You go and make things right, we will wait here and pray for you." They suggest a joint effort: "...that we may look for him with you."

And she knows where to find him. He's in a favourite garden (See Ecclesiastes 2.4-6) giving her space and time to reflect on the earlier incident. He does not demand or hurry reconciliation, but waits patiently for her.

It is hard to know if he is in a real garden gathering lilies (?) or whether the browsing has the symbolic sense of his once again attending to the affairs of state. In any case, 6.3 is an almost exact replica of 2.16 and is the second time in the Song that she affirms the deep sense of belonging that they share.

But the alert reader will notice that the order has been switched. In courtship, still a bit insecure and tentative, she leads with a somewhat possessive, "My lover is mine...", but here she reverses the phrases. Marriage has brought more security, even with his outside call and interests as Israel's monarch. "I am my lover's..." A healthy marriage creates both the skills for two to become fully one, and the space needed for each one to become more fully themselves.

And now it's his turn.

III. RESOURCES

The following books are helpful in the area of conflict resolution:

Augsburger, David. *Caring Enough to Confront* (1980). Herald Press.

Dobson, James. *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women* (1990). Tyndale.

Smalley, Gary. *If Only He Knew* (1987). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Wright, H. Norman. *After You Say I Do* (2002). Harvest House.

Wright, H. Norman. *Communication: Key to Your Marriage* (2002) Ventura, California: Regal Press.

IV. RESPONSE

1. If you are in a serious relationship, make a list of issues or concerns that are occasional or chronic “red flags” for you. What areas of conversation do you ignore or avoid because they seem to be recipes for disharmony? (If you keep sweeping things “under the rug,” you will sooner or later stumble over those bumpy places and get hurt!)
2. Will you set a date to get a diagnosis and some treatment for marriage “sicknesses” that you have identified? (As we know the key to treating a disease like cancer is to catch it early.)
3. Create a list together of those, single or married, who will help you fight for your marriage with their gifts of teaching, rebuking, correcting, or training (see II Timothy 3.16-17). Are there marriages for which you are praying, and where you have been allowed counselling access?

Study Ten

The Progress: His Cleverness! (6.4-13)

I. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. What are your overall impressions of his speech in 6.4-9?
2. Compare 6.4-7 with 4.1-5. Which areas are repeated and what is the significance of this?
3. Which items are omitted, and what is he trying to communicate through what he does not say?
4. Should we take someone's counsel seriously who admits to 6.8? How are we to explain this rather startling verse?
5. Who is speaking in 6.10, and what is the message? What is the possible connection between verses 10 and 13?
6. Overall, 6.10-13 is a very difficult passage! How should we approach and interpret areas of Scripture that are confusing or ambiguous? How would you paraphrase these verses?
7. There is a word in the last verse that occurs in the Song for the first time. What is it, and what could it mean?

The Quest (for more understanding)

1. Think of as many Scriptural instances of disagreement as you can. What were the issues, and how were they resolved (if they were!)?
2. In church history and in contemporary churches, what are the most common reasons that Christians "fight"? Should such disagreements be eliminated or better managed, and if so, how?
3. Think of your most recent conflict with a friend, or colleague, or marriage partner. If you could replay that scene, what would you change?
4. Please listen to and then discuss Teri Clark's "I Just Wanna Be Mad for Awhile." (Lyrics provided under Resources). Ask: do you think this marriage is going to last?

II. REFLECTION

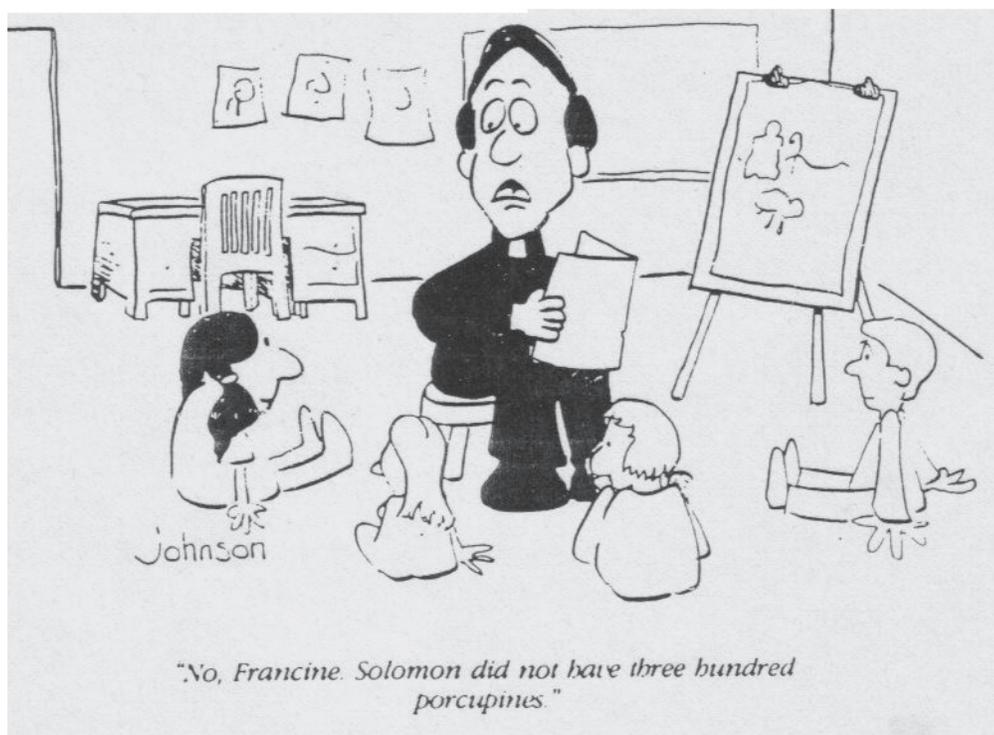
Several years ago Marabel Morgan wrote an unusual book about marriage called *The Total Woman*. She had some strange advice (greet your husband coming home from work wearing nothing but a smile...) but also had some nuggets. One that has stayed with me over the years is this, "All it takes for a marriage to succeed is two good forgivers."

It is quite clear that Solomon has forgiven and accepted his wife, even though he probably did not hear her nice speech in chapter five. We notice four things about his role in setting things right.

1. He includes some familiar words. Comparing and contrasting this speech with his honeymoon address in the fourth chapter is a great exercise. He repeats his praise of her overall beauty, hair, teeth, and temples word for word, so that she may have wondered "Hey, I didn't know that he recorded all that lovely stuff our first night together..." It's as if he is trying to say to her in a creative way, "You are still the girl I married. I said 'I do' at the start of our journey together, and 'I still do!'"

Cathy and I agreed early on in our marriage never to say the word "d-i-v-o-r-c-e" or even entertain the thought. We would find, on earth or from heaven, the willpower to work things through. Another quite well-known story about Ruth Graham has an interviewer asking her, "Have you ever considered divorcing Billy when he became quite difficult to live with?" And Ruth responded, "Divorce, never! Although I must say that murder crossed my mind from time to time..."

2. He also excludes some familiar words. Strikingly, he asks her to avert her eyes, and he does not repeat lips and neck and breasts, those parts of her that are



sensuous and sensitive, and would receive much of the attention in lovemaking. But Solomon, already quite wise as a young man, knows that peacemaking should precede lovemaking, and that a reconciled life partner would make for a more ravishing sex partner.

Country singer Terri Clark recorded a recent song, “I just want to be mad for a while”, singing about a major argument that she had with her husband of seven years. The song contains this great line, “No, I don’t want to go upstairs...” It takes us (especially the men) a long time to understand that sex does not fix things. Sex is not the flour in the recipe; it’s the icing on the cake.

Friends during the Rhodesian “chimurenga” (liberation war) in the late seventies told us this delightful story. B. would be away for weeks on end in the bush, then return to town and call C., his wife. The much anticipated reunion was often a disaster because each was focused on one room, but not the same room... C. was focused on coffee and conversation in the kitchen, but B’s mind was elsewhere. Solomon might counsel that both rooms were important, but that the order of visiting them was even more so.

3. He concludes that she is special and unique and worth hanging on to! How ironic that we tend to stumble over verse 8 and all the other queens and concubines and virgins he includes (the “thorns” of 2.2.?), whereas his emphasis is clearly on verse 9 and how he excludes everyone else. He concentrates on her alone in extravagant seven-fold praise, which includes the three groups mentioned in the previous verse.

But we will agree that this verse is still a problem! Solomon does not say “I have or I have known”, but a more disarming “there may be”... He probably inherited some women from his father, a common oriental custom, and acquired numerous others in political alliances. The Pharaoh, for instance, would be more reluctant to attack Jerusalem knowing his daughter was in one of the palace wings. The relationship between Solomon and all these women appears to be far more platonic than passionate.

Another suggestion could also carry some weight. At the time of writing, Solomon had “only” 140 companions (on the way to 1000), meaning that he probably wrote this Song in his twenties, addressed to the heart, and then wrote Proverbs in his forties, addressed to the will, and finally Ecclesiastes in his sixties, addressed to the mind. When he reached an older age, all these women had led his heart astray (I Kings 11.1-6) and the weariness of it all led to the counsel given in his last book, which asks the reader to learn from the writer’s mistakes.

The argument I have used with a variety of audiences is this: should we discredit or ignore Paul’s advice about marriage and family in Ephesians 5.15-6.9, simply because he was neither a husband nor a father? What is the source of his (and of Solomon’s) credibility?

We should not discount good advice because of bad or non-application...

4. This leads us to perhaps the hardest passage in the Song, which we might call the interlude. All commentators struggle with 6.10-13, and one gentleman I read in a South African library had actually left a half page blank at this point in his commentary!

What follows is a modest attempt to make sense of these four verses. The same support community that appeared at the start of her “homecoming” speech now appears again at the end of his. The plural sense is present in verses 10 and 13, once again the bookends of the passage.

Each verse expresses four-fold delight in the reunion, in seeing the king and his bride together again. The court ladies speak in pictures of increasing light: dawn, then moon, then sun, and finally the stars in heavenly procession, and they also repeat their “Come back!” four times. They affirm the king and his bride, but also the king and his queen.

For the first time in the Song she receives a name, and it is the playful, twice-mentioned *Shulamith*, the female counterpart or companion of *Shulamo* or Solomon. (Abishag is spoken of five times in I Kings 1-2 as *Abishag the Shunamite*. If the author had changed only one Hebrew letter, he could have cleared up a lot of confusion... As it is, the beauty from the village of Shunem in northern Galilee could still be our girl in Solomon’s song.)

The harem’s excitement comes right on the heels of the girl’s careful exploration in verse 11 whether the relationship had signs of new growth and new life. She suddenly realizes in verse 12 that she felt right and good about being in his chariot, among her (adopted) people. Craig Glickman uses the interesting picture of a red Triumph convertible with a dashing young man behind the wheel. The little car seems rather empty without the ever-present attractive blond by his side. It appears that they have had a serious argument, but when she is spotted once again in his “chariot”, snuggling close and hair flowing in the wind, all the onlookers are quite relieved.

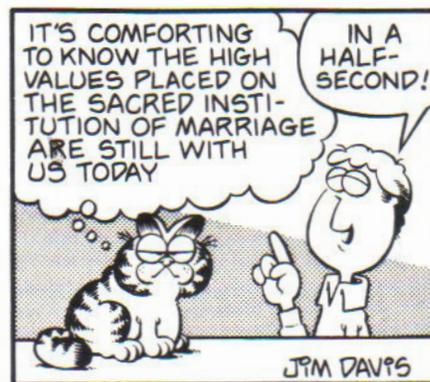
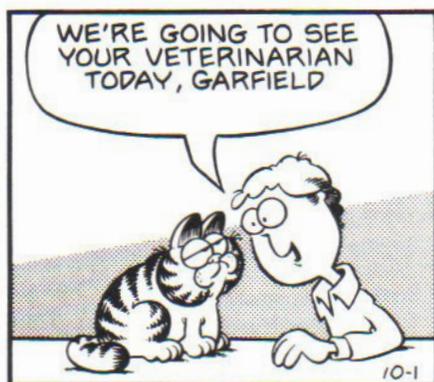
The court ladies would like to hear the stories, and perhaps take a few digital photos. But the king and queen are eager to get back to the throne room and probably past the throne room to the bedroom. That’s where chapter seven lifts the curtains for us!!

P.S. Do notice the wonderful rhythm in Solomon’s song: A firm “no” in Parts One and Three in Courtship and in Conflict, lead to a free “yes” in Parts Two and Four. The freedom and satisfaction of wedding night and wedding lifetime are heightened if we honour the anticipation needed in courtship and the agreement needed in conflict.

Song of Solomon		SOS		SOS		SOS
1.1 – 3.5		3.6 – 5.1		5.2 – 6.13		7.1 – 8.4
Courtship		Centrepiece		Conflict		Concert
ANTICIPATION	→	SEX!		AGREEMENT		SEX!
<u>NO</u> SEX				<u>NO</u> SEX		

III. RESOURCES

- Arterburn, Stephen. *Being God's Man as a Satisfied Single* (2003). Random House.
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- Howe, Michelle. *Going It Alone: Meeting the Challenges of Being a Single Mom*.
- Hsu, Albert Y. *Singles at the Crossroads* (1997). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- McDonald, Skip. *And She Lived Happily Ever After: Finding Fulfillment as a Single Woman* (2005). InterVarsity Press.
- Rinehart, Paula. *Choices: Finding God's Way in Dating, Sex, and Singleness* (1996). NavPress.
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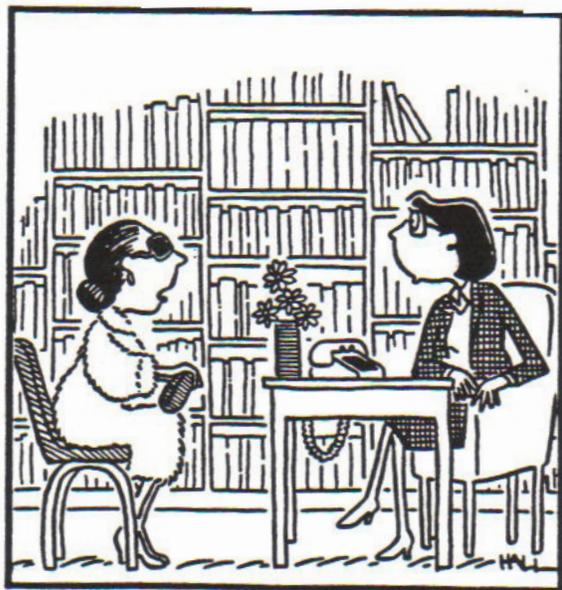


IV. RESPONSE

Although the Song is all about courtship and marriage and sex, this is not the only game plan that God has for his people. He gives the gift of marriage with His one hand, and the gift of singleness with the other. It is very likely the “gift that nobody wants’ but is still called a *charisma*, or gift of the Spirit in I Corinthians 7.8.

The following questions are for those living single, or singled, by separation or divorce or death. They are for those single by choice or by circumstances. And they are for those living among and with those whom God has called to singleness.

1. What should we understand about singleness from the Scriptural teaching in Matthew 19.11-12, and I Corinthians 7.1-9?
2. What are the unique stresses, but also the unique opportunities, available to those whom God has called to singleness?
3. Critically evaluate this comment, “You should assume that singleness is God’s will for you, unless and until He clearly shows you otherwise.” (We might call this the theology of reversed expectations.)
4. How should single men and women handle their relational and sexual needs? And how can our churches more helpfully care about and care for this part of their flock?



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“I’ve never been good at repentance, Pastor. I’ll just let you use my condo during August, and God can call it even.”

