

“Romantic Conflict”

// Luke 9:23-24

Do your relationships or marriage ever feel like a Dr. Seuss book? Do your conversations ever sound like this?

My name is Sam,
A good spouse I am.
Simple needs are all I ask.
Not too hard is any task.
Listen, touch me, hold my hand;
Let's go for a walk on the sand.

I would kiss you on the mouth,
But please not outside the house.
Time together, just name the place,
But after everything is in its space.
I've done so much, you know it's true,
How could you doubt that “I love you”?

It feels like I give more than I receive,
Neglect is all that I can perceive.
Anyone fairly keeping score
Would clearly see that I've done more.
The omitted things that I have asked,
Must reveal you want this marriage axed.

I do not want to bring this pain,
Why make me ask these things again?
A happy marriage should not depend
On how well I can pretend
If you cannot be my friend
We should just call this “the end.”

I hate you, I love you
Can both really be true?
Don't leave me; get out of my face
How can we share this same space?
Things can be so good; so bad
Our marriage may just drive me mad.

We'll stay together for the kids
But I refuse to live on the skids
What's the point, we're both not happy
Happily ever after, now seems so sappy
Is this what God designed?
Should we really just live resigned?

When I take the time to think it through
I remember the things I love about you.
Differences that seemed monumental
Suddenly seem much more trivial
How will we ever be free
To enjoy marriage as God meant it to be?

Well, if this pastor gig doesn't work out maybe I can author a series of dysfunctional children stories – “Warping the next generation before they can warp themselves.”

Question: How will we be able to enjoy the blessings God intended to provide through marriage without becoming consumed by them?

This question is broader than marriage. The same way our desires and expectations can hijack a marriage they can derail a friendship or small group. The principles we are going to learn today about the source and solution of conflict in marriage applies to all relationships in which we have conflicts, that is any relationship involving you and other humans.

In a broken world with limited time and money, not every legitimate desire can be fulfilled. Unfortunately, we tend to remember disappointments more than our fulfillments.

“Deny himself”

It may be surprising to you that Jesus’ foundational call to be a disciple addressed these very issues.

Luke 9:23-24. And he [Jesus] said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

In this message, we will go through this passage three times.

- First, we will walk through the straight forward application of the passage.
- Second, we will use the key principles of this passage to rewrite how we do conflict.
- Third, we will allow this passage to reignite romance within our marriages.

Take One:

The Straight Forward Meaning of the Passage

“To all... If anyone”

No one is exempt from this passage. Some passages of Scripture have a relatively narrow primary audience – husbands, wives, children, pastors, workers, singles, etc... But that is not the case here.

“Come after... follow me”

There is no such thing as a good, married Christian who is a bad spouse; a good Christ-follower is, by definition, a good spouse-lover. We must resist the tendency to treat relational development as if it were unrelated to the character transformation that occurs in basic discipleship. The fruit of the Spirit, if present, will radically impact every relationship for the better.

The biggest obstacle to being a great spouse or friend stares at each of us in the mirror every morning. Too often we become distracted and consumed by the things we cannot change and turn a blind eye to the focal point of God’s primary work in our life.

Point: “I’m just human... nobody’s perfect” is why Jesus came! Our excuse, where we want to shut down conversation, is the very point where Christ wants to begin a relationship with us.

“Take up his cross daily”

We do not get to take a break from being a Christian or a good spouse. The defining mark of both a Christian and a good spouse or friend is learning to enjoy daily transformation involved in each.

“Life”

This is THE big question, “Where do you find life?”

- Where do you turn for relief after a stressful day?
- Where do you cast your cares when life is hard?
- How do you reward yourself when you’ve done well?

The answer to these questions will be the center of your (a) marital conflict, (b) marital romance, and (c) your entire walk with Christ.

“Save... lose”

Most of what we do to control the things that matter most to us wind up making life worse.

Illus: We are like Wiley Coyote trying out one Acme product after another to catch the Road Runner. Every time we get blown up or fall off a cliff in the process. We...

- try harder (become a controlling perfectionist),
- give up (neglect or say things like “We’re done”),
- distract ourselves (overspend or lose our marriage in parenting),
- find some other way to “save” our “life” that hurts our relationship.

“Lose... save”

This is the essence of faith in the gospel. In hindsight, this is a trade we would label a “no brainer” (nobody look back on sin and says “that was a good idea!”). But, in the moment, it is always frightening.

“For my sake”

The gospel is not a gimmick or a game. The gospel is not a set of rules by which we can manipulate God and get Him to give us what we really want. **If we do not ultimately want God, then we don't get the gospel and will not be able to enjoy anything else (at least not for long).**

Take Two: Conflict Rewritten

This time we are going to take **a narrative approach**. The narrative we'll walk through is that of a typical conflict in your home.

Start by remembering the last several arguments you've had. You don't have 100's of different arguments. You have the same handful of arguments with dozens of different triggers and details.

- Examples: schedule, an insecurity, a pet peeve, being selfish

Imagine one or more of these arguments occurring at your **kitchen table**.

If you will take the imagery seriously, it will help you visualize how the gospel transforms conflict and never allow you to see conflict the

same way again. Part of my objective is to **ruin conflict for you**. Too often we are too comfortable with patterns that are too destructive... then we act like what God's asks of us is too much.

A. Come to the Table

Start by sitting down at the table. This reveals the presence/absence of self-control and determines whether the issue is a relational, two-person issue or personal, one-person issue.

Next, each of you should **hold a picture** of the two of you in your hands. Holding this picture represents that you are valuing the marriage more than whatever issue is being discussed and your desires that are impacted by the disagreement.

Then each of you should **place objects** that represent your most common or significant desires in front of you on the table. These objects represent the things that you want badly enough that you are frequently willing to sin against your spouse in order to attain them.

- **Benefit of Doubt** – a cup with “half full” written on it
- **Order/Predictability** – a day planner
- **Hobby** – golf ball or favorite Pinterest project
- **Fairness** – referee whistle
- **Affirmation/Gratitude** – thank you card

You'll quickly notice something about this list. **They are all good things**. This is what makes our bad actions in conflict feel so justified. In my actions I see motives; in your actions I see the outcomes.

But before moving on, stop to evaluate if some of the things you want from this list have become **good words with too much weight**.

- Too often “respect” can begin to mean “never questioned,”
- “Peace” can mean “never asked to do anything uncomfortable”
- “Love” can mean “knows what I'm thinking without me telling you.”

This is **Genesis 3** all over again – like Adam and Eve who wanted to know/define good and evil for themselves by eating the fruit, we are often willing to use God’s words but want to define them by our preferences.

See how much we “trust and obey” what our desires (i.e., idols) say without question even if it means harming those we love.

Pause for a moment and hear **Luke 14:26** in light of this reality. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

We cringe when we hear Jesus say this, but we blindly follow our desires into destructive conflict when they ask the same. **But Jesus can be trusted in a way that our desires cannot.**

B. See the Exchange

If either of you communicate with dishonor, then you must **put the picture down** and pick up the object that you are valuing more than your marriage at the moment. This is the painful reality **Luke 6:45 – “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks”** – alerts us to.

What does it look like to communicate with dishonor? To communicate with dishonor is to value something (object, activity, or desire) more than someone.

- raising your voice, condescending tones,
- stringing together unanswerable rhetorical questions,
- silent treatment, bringing up past offenses, shaming,
- calling names, exaggeration, changing subjects,
- telling your spouse what they were really thinking; why they did something (mind reading),
- being defensive about genuine faults, or
- passive-aggressive forms of appeasement

This is what is happening every time we sin; whether it’s in our marriage or not. We are putting down a relationship (ultimately our relationship with God) to pick up something we believe will give us more/better life.

Illus: Gollum – I hate that creepy critter because I am so like him Obsessed with “my precious, my precious” object of desire until my soul shrivels and I become a nuisance to those on life’s journey with me.

Seeing the emptiness of this exchange is vital to genuine repentance. Blindness to this exchange makes godly communication seem like a guilt-based coercion that always allows your spouse to “win.”

The **next step** will become very intuitive (although not easy) Acknowledge your sin, repent, put the object down, pick up the picture, and ask for the opportunity to continue the conversation.

This is the only way back to **relational sanity**. Until we do this we will continue to rationalize that sacrificing the marriage for our desire was the “only logical” response to the circumstance.

This exercise should have another effect; it should show us how much we neglect what is important to our spouse during conflict.

We must realize how much our untamed desires create the “pink team” and “blue team” where our differences are more significant than our covenant. **In marriage, if one person wins then both spouses lose. This is what it means to be “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).**

C. Live the Contradiction

Now we should be able to more clearly see how Jesus’ conclusion in Luke 9:24 is true. If we seek to save our object of desire, we will lose it.

E. Jesus Versus Satan

- If we demand gratitude, we may hear “thank you” but it won’t do for us what we wanted.
- If we demand affection, we may get a kiss but it will not create the energy we desired.
- If we insist on time to engage our hobby, we will feel guilty as we do it and grow in bitterness.

To see this, let’s go back to the table. We haven’t finished our argument (How does that make you feel?). Visualize getting through your disagreement, putting down the picture each time a desire begins to rule your heart, then repentantly picking it up, and asking to continue. What happens then? What is the “reward”?

The gospel blossoms in your marriage.

You can put down the picture again, but this time get up, walk to the other side of the table, pick up your spouse’s objects, and say something like this:

“You’re not crazy for wanting these things. I want you to have these things. More than that, I want our marriage to be a safe place for us to pursue these things together. I don’t want you to feel like you have to compete with me for these things; I am for you. Thank you for being willing to sacrifice these while we discussed [summarize subject], but I want you to have them.”

While this may sound cheesy and foreign, pause for a moment and compare it to what you call “normal.” In a fallen world, “normal” is broken and, as Christians, we are called to live as “peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9 KJV).

We want to do conflict in a way that reminds us of core gospel truths and that non-Christians could watch and be drawn to the good news.

This requires seeing that Luke 9:23-24 is the way to John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I [Jesus] came that they may have life and have it abundantly”

Let’s contrast four points from John 10:10 with Luke 9:23-24 to set the stage for romance.

“Thief... Jesus”

We will follow one of two agendas for our life: the many agendas of Satan (our “common sense” – “How’s that working for you?”), all of which lead to our loss, and the agenda of Jesus which leads to life. Our choices, especially in the emotionally powerful moments like conflict, will be what ratifies one of these two agendas.

“Steal... kill... destroy”

If these words describe our post-conflict experiences – feeling robbed, depleted, and undone – then we can be confident our approach to conflict has been at odds with the gospel. That is more than saying we have broken the “etiquette rules” of Scripture (which is also true); it means, in the midst of our conflict, we have tried to rely on God’s blessings for what only God Himself can provide (Jer 2:11-13).

“Life”

Here is that word from Luke 9:24 again. All of Scripture is our Creator calling us back to the “life” He intended us to have.

“Abundantly”

God is not stingy, but those who do not have His character cannot enjoy His blessings. Apart from the transforming power of the gospel even God cannot out-give our ability to be suspicious, score-keeping and take advantage of one another.

It is this “abundant life” that God intends to give (in part) through marital romance, so let’s look at how Luke 9:23-24 can reignite romance.

Take Three: Romance Reignited

Our temptation at this point is to think that we should rid the table of any other desires but Jesus. If we succumb to this thinking, change will either be short-lived or tainted by a martyr's tone.

Let's start by making two observations.

First, the objects we fight over are the things we want in romance. There are not two lists; the things we are hurt by in conflict and the things we want in romance.

This means any book on conflict that does not continue on to romance is incomplete and any book on romance that does not start with conflict is simplistic.

Second, after conflict, the things we wanted in romance become "weaponized."

- Once you've yelled at me about not being affectionate enough, it doesn't feel safe to come close to you anymore.
- After you've punished me to send the message you wanted to spend more time together, coming close feels like fulfilling a duty more than a delight.

Think of it this way. Anger says two things: (a) this is wrong and (b) it matters. Sinful anger says a third thing: (c) more than you. When we do conflict poorly we add to the basket of things that are more important than our marriage; the number of things we will gamble setting the picture down for in order to gain.

In conflict done well, we empty the basket of things that are more important than our spouse. Instead of there being a growing list of unsafe subjects, there is a growing sense that we can go anywhere that is important to us in conversation. That is powerfully romantic.

A. Setting another Table

Yes, I am "that counselor" – highly intrusive. Hopefully you're intrigued enough by what we've covered already that you'll continue with me.

Start by getting or repurposing an end table in your bedroom and cover it with a nice piece of fabric that matches the bedroom décor (so your wife will let it stay in the room).

At the back-center of the table place a **tall self-standing cross**.

In front of the cross place a **framed edition of the same picture** from your kitchen-table conflicts.

On one side of the table **place your "objects of desire"** and on the other side place your spouse's objects. Each morning as you get ready and each evening as you dress down, look at the table and be reminded of how God intends to bless your marriage through the gospel.

Your calling as a Christian spouse is to refuse to be ruled by the things on your side of the table and to ensure that the objects on your spouse's side of the table never collect dust. A tell-tale sign of a gospel-centered marriage is when you spend more of your creative energy daydreaming about your spouse's desires than your own (Phil 2:3-4).

Do couples really do this? No, not naturally; not apart from the gospel changing their hearts.

As you look at this table in your bedroom, realize that a primary way God intends to keep His promise of "life abundant" to your spouse is your willingness to "lose your life for His sake."

This is a primary way a couple "protects" each other in marriage. Chances are you will never have the opportunity to save your spouse from a violent intruder or out-of-control vehicle – our odd, but

common mental images of “protecting our spouse.” But you can cooperate with God to protect your spouse’s soul from idolatry and bitterness by being skilled and creative in how you love your spouse.

B. Creativity with Direction

Hopefully now you can begin to see the things on your spouse’s side of the table as blessings instead of burdens.

The beauty of gospel-centered romance is that it allows your spouse to add new desires to the table without you having a defensive reaction,

- “Great! More things for me to do.”
- “Another bar I will never be able to reach.
- “Another foreign love language for me to learn. My spouse thinks I’m the Rosetta Stone of romance.”

Marriage “ruts” are the inevitable outcome of not expressing new desires and being creative with old ones. Over a lifetime you and your spouse will change in profound ways. This necessitates a great deal of learning, sharing, and creativity or your romantic efforts will quickly become mundane, routine, and out of date – “more like roommates.”

Four Questions

First, have you given your life to Christ by forsaking your driving desires for His grace?

If not, everything that has been said is unattainable. Jesus will not be reduced to a technique. We do not get to date Jesus. Until we are His, He is not ours (and neither are His blessings).

Jesus did not come to remedy our lack of understanding. Jesus came to remedy the problem of our selfish, foolish hearts. That is why Jesus demands to be our Lord – it is the only way for us to know freedom and “life” God wants us to have.

Second, what have you considered “life” and refused to place at the feet of the cross... both once-for-all and daily?

Question: What things do you “Go Gollum” with?

The answer to this second question is larger than marital conflict and romance. Answering this question is the key to emotional health (i.e. anxiety, depression, anger, etc...), avoiding a mid-life crisis, balanced parenting, having a healthy relationship with food, and not being consumed by your work.

It is the things we try to rescue from the cross that become our self-inflicted prisons.

Third, how do you seek to “save your life” in conflict (patterns of behavior)?

When we call these actions “reactions to our needs being unmet” or “aspects of our personality to be accepted” we cut ourselves off from the power of the gospel.

Neither rudeness nor any other form of unhealthy communication is a personality type. The cycle of explaining our bad behavior by someone else’s bad behavior or “this is just who I am” is a slippery slope from which Christ rescued us at the cost of His blood.

Fourth (linchpin question), do you truly believe that God will keep His promise to give you life if you sacrifice what you consider life for His sake?

Unless we truly believe God’s promise we will quit when times get hard and grow bitter over the things we lost when we “tried” things God’s way.

This is why living out the gospel requires more community than you spouse. Marriage was never meant to replace the church. Faith was never meant to be an individual sport, or even a two player game. Faith is always a community project.

If you are serious about doing the things we've talked about it, it will involve more than sitting at a kitchen table and redecorating your bedroom; it requires inviting people into your living room.

While it may seem like an awkward conclusion at first, a final word needs to be said. Sermons, seminars, conferences and books don't change marriages.

I have heard too many couples on the brink of divorce say,

“We read the best books, went to the best events, dated each other regularly, and still had our marriage go sour,” although I would recommend all of these activities.

But I have never heard a couple considering divorce say,

“We have been honest with mutually trusted friends about our struggles in each season of life, received prayer and sought accountability, but our marriage still went bad.”

We must realize that God's Word was never meant to make us independent of God's person or God's people.

You have heard God's Word. The question is whether you need to

(1) enter into greater reliance upon God's people by being transparent about which parts of this sermon sounded like you with your small group (or joining one if you're not in one)

(2) enter into reliance upon God's person by starting a personal relationship with Christ, accepting his death on the cross as the payment for your sin, and trusting that the “life” he offers is better than anything your attempts “saving your life” can ever provide.

End Notes:

Material more applicable to those marriages marked by chronic abuse or neglect can be found here:

www.bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse

If you would like the article length manuscript of this message (contains about double the content as these sermon notes), please use the link www.summitrdu.com/contact to request a copy.