

AVOID GRIDLOCK

As we move through this series it is important to remember that the five-to-one ratio of five positive interactions to one negative is central to a successful marriage. It is the combined effect of many small positives which creates the framework for success in your Christian marital journey. Listening when your spouse is talking, or brightening when he or she enters the room, or reading the Dilbert comics she points out (even though you would rather finish reading the sports page first), or inquiring about the book your spouse is reading at bedtime, are all examples of building the framework to handle disagreements, respectfully. The small stuff on a daily basis really matters. Remember Mother Teresa's advice on living a Christian life. She said, "Do small things with great love." Marriage researcher John Gottman's research echoes Mother Teresa's advice.

The focus today is on the need to occasionally discuss unresolvable issues. Gottman found that successfully married couples periodically discussed, sometimes heatedly, some of their unresolvable problems. Often they used slow startup, repair efforts, accepting influence and some compromises in doing this. Sometimes it would be very heated. However, their mutual respect and commitment to their marriage, the overall positive relationship build upon 'small stuff,' the little acts of respect and affection enabled them to decently air their grievances.

Sadly, today, some couples divorce because they do not realize, sometimes until after several marriages, that choosing a partner is choosing a set of problems. Along with the positive qualities you embrace the not so positive qualities. We are all flawed. A person will need to live with a set of problems no matter who you choose as a spouse. For example:

Paul married Alice and Alice gets loud at parties and Paul, who is shy, hates that. But if Paul had married Susan, he and Susan would have gotten into a fight before they even get to the party. That's because Paul is always late and Susan hates to be kept waiting. She would feel taken for granted, which she is very sensitive about. Paul would experience her complaining about this as her attempt to dominate him, which he is very sensitive about. If Paul had married Gail, they wouldn't have even gone to the party because they would still be upset about an argument they had the day before about Paul's not helping with the housework. To Gail when Paul does not help she feels abandoned, about which she is sensitive, and to Paul Gail's complaining is an attempt at domination, about which he is sensitive. The same is true about Alice. If she had married Steve, she would have the opposite problem, because Steve gets drunk at parties and she would get so angry at his drinking that they would get into a fight about it. If she had married Lou, she and Lou would have enjoyed the party but then when they got home the trouble would begin when Lou wanted sex because he always wants sex when he wants to feel closer, but sex is something Alice only wants when she already feels close.

You get the picture! People fall into serial monogamy chasing the perfect spouse who does not exist. We marry a child of God flawed like ourselves and our calling is to a journey of mutual love, honoring, and some putting up with. The spouse you choose has wonderful qualities, values, enjoyable aspects of personality and, yes, some annoying quirks.

Successful couples accentuate the positive. They will and act for the good of the other. Occasionally they need to air their differences, compromise where they can and continue to build a history together of overcoming difficulties and sharing many positive experiences and accomplishments.

Go ahead and occasionally air your gripes; successful couples do this. Learn, over the years, to do this in a respectful manner. Solve the solvable problems. Be willing to compromise around the unsolvable ones. Let this process be part of your marriage. Gottman calls this

“positive sentiment override.” The positive teamwork on a daily basis provides the motivation to occasionally swallow pride and do your best to work on differences. If you do not engage in this process, you can end up in a “gridlock” of resentment which will lower emotional bank accounts, and make it less likely that a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative will occur. As Christian married couples our focus on our call to love one another will help us keep the gripes in perspective and make compromise possible. As you respectfully air your gripes solvable and unsolvable you can become better at softened start up, accepting influence, doing compromises and repair attempts. Making up can be fun and the mutual respect you get from the process of give and take will lead to more of “doing small things with great love.”

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