

MARRIAGE

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One day about three weeks into our marriage, my wife and I were returning to our new home after running some errands. As we were walking into our new home with hands full of groceries and other things, my wife took a bite of a granola bar she gotten out in the car – we were out past lunch and were starving. I, coming from a particularly clean and tidy family with maybe an extra ounce of know-it-all-ness, remember in a sort of slow motion watching a small chunk of the granola bar fall from her lips onto floor of our entry way and her continuing—hands full—on her way to the kitchen. Young, naïve, and full of my own experiences and expectations, I followed her. What ensued was the first of many marital conflicts throughout the years over insignificant and forgettable issues.

I have learned that although the slights or problems of marital conflict may be little in and of themselves, the thoughts and feelings I have in reaction are real and can be significant. Large or small, marital conflict results in emotional pain. Marital conflict acts as a live wire that connects straight to our core; it causes us to ask the biggest questions:

- Identity: *Am I good enough? Am I loved? Desired? Worthy?*
- Safety: *Can I be safe here? Can I be open and intimate? Is this person dependable?*
- Connectedness: *Do I belong? Am I alone?*

John Gottman, author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, has done extensive study in the field of marriage relationships and has written about how conflict exists in almost every couple. He says that the success or failure of the relationship often depends on how well the couple handles the conflict. This does not necessarily mean solving the problem, but how the couple responds and interacts during the conflict is the key to a successful marriage.

In unhappy marriages, the couples go around and around in their arguments, one partner hurting the other, who in turn inflicts hurt on the first partner. This is called the *pain cycle* in marriage. It is something that couples can understand and interrupt, replacing the pain cycle with a *peace cycle*. As a counselor, I help each partner to understand where that pain is coming from and what they normally do when they feel that way. Identifying and understanding those core questions—our underlying emotions in conflict—is necessary to move into a cycle of peace. Doing so allows each partner the ability to identify the truth about them, no matter how they might feel in conflict and in relationship to their partner.

Your partner is not always going to be able to communicate the truth for you, and the truth of this world is wrapped up in a very different narrative than those of us who locate ourselves in the stream of God's greater love story of redemption. Instead, I want each person I work with to respond to their pain by answering those core questions in light of the Truth about themselves from a heavenly view:

- Identity: *I am made perfect because of Christ. I am loved. I am precious. And I am full of worth and made in the image of God.*
- Safety: *I am protected from the victory of evil. I am known by God and able to be open. God will provide for me and never forsake me.*
- Connectedness: *I am connected to God and His people.*

Knowing that truth and holding onto it for dear life helps each partner to respond to marital conflict not from a place of fear or pain, but from a firm foundation of love and peace.

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:20-24, NIV).