

Learn How to LIVE, Not How to CONFORM

#1 Principle: *We battle the curse of seeking to control and dominate others in all our relationships.*

#2 Principle: *I will not move toward healthy relationships until I identify curse-filled relationships.*

#3 Principle: *When I look to other people for my SOURCE of life, I am committing the sin of idolatry.*

#4 Principle: *Solutions to problems that are based on grace should build us up and never wear us out.*

There are countless Christian men and women who have been taught by churches and seminar leaders that spiritual life results from *performing* according to certain principles. They've been taught to gauge spiritual success by *outward performance standards* and have not been shown the internal steps that lead to real, from-the-heart-out empowerment and transformation. We need to be shown how to live. Many Christians wrongly believe that unsolved problems in relationships are proof of failure in the Christian life. They think Christian works are a magical "family problem-solver." But we get worn out.

PRINCIPLE #4: *Solutions to problems that are based on grace should build us up and never wear us out.*

If you are married, how long did you live with your spouse before you realized that your relationship was not working out the way you thought it would? Most people who come to me for counseling reply, "Six months." It is significant to note that this tends to be the answer of people who have been married a year, five years, ten years, or forty years. How have they managed to get by, then, for the balance of the time when their relationship was in a state of breakdown? On a fundamental level, most of us wrongly believe that we must work harder to overcome problems. And when problems continue our answer is: "Work harder." What happens when our hard work fails? Couples avoid the deeper issues by:

#1 DENYING THE PROBLEM

The first alternative most of us choose is to deny the presence of the problem. Why do we do this? **Most of us feel it is our job to keep each other happy by means of our good behavior.** We refuse to confront an issue because we might hurt the person or make him mad. We don't realize this is a sad effort to control the behavior or feelings of others. Depending on how long we can keep up the facade, the easiest way to maintain our false sense of peace is to deny there is a problem. We live in fundamental dishonesty. Untrue things are said, and the true things, which need to be said, are treated as taboo.

ILLUSTRATION FROM JEFF VANVONDEREN: Consider Danine. She thought it was her Christian duty to keep her husband, Rick, going to church. The truth was this: Rick didn't really want to go to church. He didn't want to go to the Friday night Bible study. In fact, he didn't really care about God at all. But Danine thought it was her job to get him to care. She had tried, she was tired, and she wanted me to help her do her job. What follows is our conversation: **JEFF:** *Instead of going through two days of hinting, plotting, and bugging, why don't you simply inform Rick, in time for him to get ready, that you'll be leaving for church?* **DANINE:** *What if he doesn't get ready?* **JEFF:** *Then go without him.* **DANINE:** *Well, what should I tell everyone who asks where he is?* **JEFF:** *What have you been telling them so far?* **DANINE:** *That he's sick, or out of town. Or anything I can think of.* **JEFF:** *Why don't you tell them the truth?* **DANINE:** *What-that Rick would rather stay home and watch professional wrestling?* **JEFF:** *Is that the truth?* **DANINE:** *Yes. That or cartoons!* **JEFF:** *Well, tell them that.* **DANINE:** *But if I told them that, what would people think?* **JEFF:** *People would think what is true that Rick cares more about professional wrestling than church.* **DANINE:** *But how would that look?* **JEFF:** *It would look like exactly like the truth.*

Danine had been living this way for many years. She sought to control people's opinion of her husband. And, I think, to control their opinion of her as well. She acted this way because of the subtle false belief that performance, not inner heart transformation, is what the Christian life is all about. By taking the responsibility for other people's perception of Rick's behavior, she was helping Rick stay home-the exact opposite of what she wished would happen. Christians can make believe themselves into the worst liars.

#2 FIXING THE OTHER PERSON

The second alternative you might choose is to try to "fix" the behavior of your spouse. The fact that your peace and well-being depend on your spouse's performance leads us to an interesting point, one you may never have considered: If your peace and happiness depends on your spouse, then that person has become a false god to you (see LESSON #3). When your spouse is not performing up to your expectations, do you believe it is your job to fix his/her behavior? Then you will always live in a rut: You will always be working hard to restore your spouse to a level of "right" behavior or lose all sense of calm and closeness. But the truth is the "peace" is only external and temporary. The relationship feels like a roller-coaster ride, with its highs coming from your self-effort and the other person's effort.

ILLUSTRATION: YOU: You never hug me anymore. I barely get any affection from you at all. In fact, this morning when I was sad after that conversation with [a friend], I needed a hug from you. You knew that, and you all but avoided me. **SPOUSE:** I didn't know you needed a hug. If you wanted a hug, why didn't you just ask for one? What am I, a mind reader? I would have hugged you if you'd asked. **YOU:** I shouldn't have to ask. You should want to give me affection. Remember when we were dating? You could hardly keep your hands off me. Those days are sure gone! Now it's like pulling teeth.

VERBAL TACTICS USED TO FIX THE OTHER PERSON - Blaming: If you didn't do [such and such] we wouldn't be in such a mess. **Comparing:** Why can't you act like your [sibling, neighbor, friend]? You never see them doing that, do you? **Challenging:** If you really loved me, you wouldn't be. **Shaming:** I can't believe you did that. What's wrong with you? What would the people at church think? **Denial:** If you're going to act that way, at least don't let [kids, parents, in-laws, friends] see you.

#3 FIXING YOURSELF (To Fix the Other Person)

The third scenario that often occurs in a marriage is that a man or woman attempts to fix him/herself in the hope of changing his/ her spouse. Very simply put, we sometimes tell ourselves: *If I get myself straightened out, then he/she will change.* The primary example of this is the kind of false submission that is too often encouraged by many Christian pastors, teachers, and seminar leaders.

Going along outwardly while inwardly strongly disagreeing is pretending, not submission.

Thinking it is Christian to "submit" wrong behaviors, especially when your heart keeps telling you that something is missing is not Christian. To "submit" out of fear of the consequences for disagreeing, or speaking up (or out), "white-knuckling" under the uncontrolled, childish anger, is really selfishness. Keeping peace outwardly while in turmoil inwardly is actually a sign of a marriage in trouble. When anyone "submits" outwardly in order to escape fear, ease guilt, or "prove" their spirituality, there is no real submission. True submission releases us from fear, helps us face and change behaviors that make us guilty, and causes us to grow stronger in spirit. **Accept no substitutes.**

VanVonderen, Jeff. Families Where Grace Is in Place (p. 54). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.