

PROBLEM SOLVING IN MARRIAGE

*Spiritual growth comes
by solving problems together—not
by running from them.*

—President Ezra Taft Benson

SELECTED TEACHINGS

President Ezra Taft Benson

“My message is to return to the God-ordained fundamentals that will ensure love, stability, and happiness in our homes. . . .

“ . . . A husband and wife must attain righteous unity and oneness in their goals, desires, and actions.

“Marriage itself must be regarded as a sacred covenant before God. A married couple have an obligation not only to each other, but to God. He has promised blessings to those who honor that covenant.

“Fidelity to one’s marriage vows is absolutely essential for love, trust, and peace. Adultery is unequivocally condemned by the Lord.

“Husbands and wives who love each other will find that love and loyalty are reciprocated. This love will provide a nurturing atmosphere for the emotional growth of children. Family life should be a time of happiness and joy that children can look back on with fond memories and associations.

“Restraint and self-control must be ruling principles in the marriage relationship. Couples must learn to bridle their tongues as well as their passions.

“Prayer in the home and prayer with each other will strengthen your union. Gradually thoughts, aspirations, and ideas will merge into a oneness until you are seeking the same purposes and goals. Rely on the Lord, the teachings of the prophets, and the scriptures for guidance and help, particularly when there may be disagreements and problems.

“Spiritual growth comes by solving problems together—not by running from them. Today’s inordinate emphasis on individualism brings egotism and separation. Two individuals becoming ‘one flesh’ is still the Lord’s standard. (See Gen. 2:24.)

“The secret of a happy marriage is to serve God and each other. The goal of marriage is unity and oneness, as well as self-development. Paradoxically, the more we serve one another, the greater is our spiritual and emotional growth” (“Salvation—A Family Affair,” *Ensign*, July 1992, 2–4).

Elder Boyd K. Packer

“We live in a day when the adversary stresses on every hand the philosophy of instant gratification. We seem to demand *instant* everything, including instant solutions to our problems.

“We are indoctrinated that somehow we should always be instantly emotionally comfortable. When that is not so, some become anxious—and all too frequently seek relief from counseling, from analysis, and even from medication.

“It was meant to be that life would be a challenge. To suffer some anxiety, some depression, some disappointment, even some failure is normal.

“Teach our members that if they have a good, miserable day once in a while, or several in a row, to stand steady and face them. Things will straighten out.

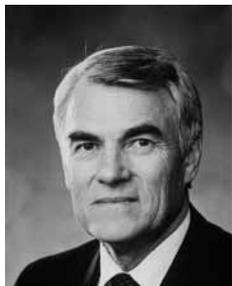
“There is great purpose in our struggle in life. . . .

“Bishop, those who come to you are children of God. Counsel them in the Lord’s own way. Teach them to ponder it in their minds, then to pray over their problems.

“Remember that soothing, calming effect of reading the scriptures. Next time you are where they are read, notice how things settle down. Sense the feeling of peace and security that comes. . . .

“In the name of Jesus Christ, amen” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1978, 135–40; or *Ensign*, May 1978, 91–93).

MARRIAGE AND THE GREAT PLAN OF HAPPINESS



Elder Joe J. Christensen

*Of the Presidency
of the Seventy*

*In Conference Report,
Apr. 1995, 84–87;
or Ensign, May 1995,
64–66*

Barbara and I have been blessed with six children. Some years ago, when we had taken all of them to visit with their grandparents, my father said, “Joe, I think you and Barbara have started something you can’t stop.”

At this Easter season we declare to all the world that Jesus is the Christ and that through his holy priesthood and its sealing power, marriages and families need never stop—need never come to an end.

Today I would like to speak to all of you about our marriages. Here are eight practical suggestions that, hopefully, may be of value in strengthening our marriages, now and in the future.

Remember the Importance of Marriage

1. Remember the central importance of your marriage. Listen to these words from Elder Bruce R. McConkie on the importance of marriage in our Father in Heaven’s “great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8):

“From the moment of birth into mortality to the time we are married in the temple, everything we have in the whole gospel system is to prepare and qualify us to enter that holy order of matrimony which makes us husband and wife in this life and in the world to come. . . .

“There is nothing in this world as important as the creation and perfection of family units” (“Salvation Is a Family Affair,” *Improvement Era*, June 1970, pp. 43–44).

Pray for the Success of Your Marriage

2. Pray for the success of your marriage. Years ago, when it was common for a General Authority to tour a mission and interview all the missionaries, Elder Spencer W. Kimball, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, was visiting with an elder who was just about to finish his mission.

“When you get released, Elder, what are your plans?” “Oh, I plan to go back to college.” And then with a smile he added, “Then I hope to fall in love and get married.”

Elder Kimball shared this wise counsel: “Well, don’t just pray to marry the one you love. *Instead, pray to love the one you marry.*”

We should pray to become more kind, courteous, humble, patient, forgiving, and, *especially*, less selfish.

In order to recognize our personal problems or weaknesses which hinder us from being better marriage partners, we should come to the Lord in prayer and reap the benefits of this powerful Book of Mormon promise: “If men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness . . . ; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

And so the need to pray. Many Church leaders and marriage counselors indicate that they have not seen one marriage in serious trouble where the couple was still praying together daily. When problems arise and marriages are threatened, praying together as a couple may be the most important remedy.

Listen to Your Spouse

3. Listen. Make the time to listen to your spouse; even schedule it regularly. Visit with each other and assess how you are doing as a marriage partner.

Brother Brent Barlow posed a question to a group of priesthood brethren: “How many of you would like to receive a revelation?” Every hand went up. He then suggested that they all go home and ask their wives how they could be better husbands. He added, “I followed my own advice, and had a very informative discussion with [my wife] Susan for more than an hour that afternoon!” (“To Build a Better Marriage,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1992, p. 17). A conversation like that could be a revelation for any of us.

Have any of you brethren ever had your wife say something like I heard recently: “Joe, are you listening?” She wasn’t the only one who wondered if I was listening. Some time ago I was taking a nap and our little granddaughter Allison came and lifted up one of my eyelids and said, “Grandpa, are you in there?” We should be “in there” and responsive to our mate.

Avoid Ceaseless Pinpricking

4. Avoid “ceaseless pinpricking.” Don’t be too critical of each other’s faults. Recognize that none of us is perfect. We all have a long way to go to become as Christlike as our leaders have urged us to become.

“Ceaseless pinpricking,” as President Kimball called it, can deflate almost any marriage (“Marriage and Divorce,” *1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year* [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1977], p. 148).

Generally each of us is painfully aware of our weaknesses, and we don’t need frequent reminders. Few people have ever changed for the better as a result of constant criticism or nagging. If we are not careful, some of what we offer as *constructive* criticism is actually *destructive*.

At times it is better to leave some things unsaid. As a newlywed, Sister Lola Walters read in a magazine that in order to strengthen a marriage, couples should have regular, candid sharing sessions in which they would list any mannerisms they found to be annoying. She wrote:

“We were to name five things we found annoying, and I started off. . . . I told him that I didn’t like the way he ate grapefruit. He peeled it and ate it like an orange! Nobody else I knew ate grapefruit like that. Could a girl be expected to spend a lifetime, and even eternity, watching her husband eat grapefruit like an orange? . . .

“After I finished [with my five], it was his turn to tell the things he disliked about me. [He] said, ‘Well, to tell the truth, I can’t think of anything I don’t like about you, Honey.’

“Gasp.

“I quickly turned my back, because I didn’t know how to explain the tears that had filled my eyes and were running down my face.”

Sister Walters concluded, “Whenever I hear of married couples being incompatible, I always wonder if they are suffering from what I now call the Grapefruit Syndrome” (“The Grapefruit Syndrome,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1993, p. 13).

Yes, at times, it is better to leave some things unsaid.

Keep Your Courtship Alive

5. Keep your courtship alive. Make time to do things together—just the two of you. As important as it is to be with the children as a family, you need regular

weekly time alone together. Scheduling it will let your children know that you feel that your marriage is so important that you need to nurture it. That takes commitment, planning, and scheduling.

It doesn’t need to be costly. The time together is the most important element.

Once when my father-in-law was leaving the house after lunch to return to the field to work, my mother-in-law said, “Albert, you get right back in here and tell me you love me.” He grinned and jokingly said, “Elsie, when we were married, I told you I loved you, and if that ever changes, I’ll let you know.” It’s hard to overuse the expression “I love you.” Use it daily.

Be Quick to Say, “I’m Sorry”

6. Be quick to say, “I’m sorry.” As hard as it is to form the words, be swift to say, “I apologize, and please forgive me,” even though you are not the one who is totally at fault. True love is developed by those who are willing to readily admit personal mistakes and offenses.

When differences do arise, being able to discuss and resolve them is important, but there are instances when it is best to take a time-out. Biting your tongue and counting to ten or even a hundred is important. And occasionally, even letting the sun go down on your wrath can help bring you back to the problem in the morning more rested, calm, and with a better chance for resolution.

Occasionally we hear something like, “Why, we have been married for fifty years, and we have never had a difference of opinion.” If that is literally the case, then one of the partners is overly dominated by the other or, as someone said, is a stranger to the truth. Any intelligent couple will have differences of opinion. Our challenge is to be sure that we know how to resolve them. That is part of the process of making a good marriage better.

Live within Your Means

7. Learn to live within your means. Some of the most difficult challenges in marriage arise in the area of finances. “The American Bar Association . . . indicated that 89 percent of all divorces could be traced to quarrels and accusations over money” (Marvin J. Ashton, “One for the Money,” *Ensign*, July 1975, p. 72). Be willing to postpone or forgo some purchases in order to stay within your budget.

Pay your tithing first, and avoid debt insofar as possible. Remember that spending fifty dollars a month less than you receive equals happiness and spending fifty more equals misery. The time may have come to get out the scissors and your credit cards and perform what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland called some “plastic surgery” (“Things We Have Learned—Together,” *Ensign*, June 1986, p. 30).

Share Home and Family Responsibilities

8. Be a true partner in home and family responsibilities. Don't be like the husband who sits around home expecting to be waited on, feeling that earning the living is his chore and that his wife alone is responsible for the house and taking care of the children. The task of caring for home and family is more than one person's responsibility.

Remember that you are in this partnership together. Barbara and I have discovered that we can make our bed every morning in less than a minute and it's done for the day. She says that she lets me do it to help me feel good about myself all day, and I guess there may be something to that.

Find time to study the scriptures together, and follow this sound counsel from President Kimball: “When a husband and wife go together frequently to the holy temple, kneel in prayer together in their home with their family, go hand in hand to their religious meetings, keep their lives wholly chaste, mentally and physically, . . . and both are working together for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God, then happiness is at its pinnacle” (*Marriage and Divorce* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976], p. 24).

In summary:

- Remember the central importance of your marriage.
- Pray for its success.
- Listen.
- Avoid “ceaseless pinpricking.”
- Keep your courtship alive.
- Be quick to say, “I'm sorry.”
- Learn to live within your means.
- Be a true partner in home and family responsibilities.

I testify that Jesus is the Christ, that the tomb was empty on that third day, and that “as in Adam all

die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Thus with gratitude for the sealing power within the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, we can confidently say with the poet, “I shall but love thee better after death” (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, no. 43, line 14). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

OVERCOMING THOSE DIFFERENCES OF OPINION: A FORMULA FOR FINDING UNITY IN MARRIAGE



Elder Robert E. Wells

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*Ensign, Jan. 1987,
60–62*

Whenever two people live together, they are bound to have differences of opinion. Misunderstandings can easily arise over almost every aspect of their lives—important or unimportant—such as child discipline, housekeeping, meals, money management, decorating, which radio station to play, which movie to go to, and on and on.

Since to some extent each of us is a product of our past environments and experiences, it's only natural that we have occasional differences. People who grew up in the city do some things differently from those who grew up in the country. People from one part of the world do things differently from those in another part. Different ethnic, educational, financial, and religious backgrounds also produce differences in the ways we go about the daily details of living. There is also a natural difference between male and female points of view.

But being different doesn't necessarily mean that one person is right and the other is wrong—or that one way is better than another. Unity in marriage requires a willingness to compromise, a commitment to make the relationship work, and a dependence on the Lord. Even though there may be differences of opinion, habit, or background, husbands and wives can have “their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another.” (Mosiah 18:21.)

The Church has more than thirty thousand missionaries in the field today; yet serious problems

between companions are relatively few. Part of the reason is an excellent formula found in the *Missionary Handbook* given to all full-time missionaries. Here's what it says:

"Being able to communicate with your companion is a fundamental step in becoming a successful missionary. Hold an inventory session with your companion.

"This is a meeting in which you discuss and set goals for your work, your companion relationship, and your personal life. . . .

"Use this time to resolve any companion conflicts by bringing them out and solving them together." (pp. 25–26; stock no. PBMI4201.)

Of course, missionary companions are often either perfect strangers or only passing acquaintances when they are assigned to work together. Roommates, too, are often strangers—or friends who think they know each other well. But hopefully, a marriage begins on much stronger footing, with two people who have had sufficient time to come to know each other well.

Whatever the situation, the basic ideas behind the missionary inventory session are outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 6:19: "Admonish [your companion] in his faults, and also receive admonition of him. Be patient; be sober; be temperate; have patience, faith, hope and charity." Following are some of my observations on how to apply these ideas specifically to marriage.

Criticism

One of the hardest things to live with in any relationship is criticism, real or implied. Yet some husbands and wives demand sharply, "Why in the world did you do that?" or "I wouldn't have done it that way!" or "We don't do it that way where I come from!" or "That was a dumb thing to say." Repeated criticisms of this negative and acid nature can wear away the bonds of love until the marital fabric is weakened and ruined—with sad results for both parties.

Too often, criticism attacks tender, unprotected feelings. When we criticize, we are implying blame, censure, condemnation, reprobation, and denunciation—and we're setting ourselves up as judges, as if we were qualified to point out someone else's faults and weaknesses.

For some people, sharp questions or quick rejoinders are habits. Criticism is a form of humor for them, and

they enjoy feeling superior when they see someone else's discomfort. This is a tragic, sinful attitude that must be changed.

Talking It Out

The structure of any husband/wife discussion is, of course, flexible. It could be spontaneous, occurring whenever you or your partner sees a need. Or you could plan to hold a session regularly just to touch base—maybe weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Some prefer to keep it very informal; they discuss these items while driving in the car, while taking a walk, or while on a date together. Others prefer a more structured approach with an opening and closing prayer, a review of how things went last week (or last month), a look at the calendar for upcoming activities, and a discussion of personal and husband/wife goals.

However and whenever it is held, the discussion should focus on listening and understanding each other, solving problems, and giving loving support for the good things that are happening in the relationship.

I'd suggest that you start with the good things. Begin by expressing gratitude for each other and for your blessings. Tell your spouse the things you're most grateful for—things you most like about him or her. Be specific. Mention detailed instances and events that clearly illustrate good things your partner has done. And express your honest feelings of gratitude and love. Relationships thrive on positive thoughts, positive words, positive actions.

After sharing sincere feelings of gratitude and appreciation, you may feel that this is an appropriate time to discuss frustrations or problems in your relationship. As you do, remember Paul's words: "Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband." (I Cor. 7:3.) Warmth, sensitivity, and consideration should be dominant feelings during the discussion.

One of you might begin by asking, "What can I do to be a better husband (or wife)?" Then the other responds kindly with ideas and suggestions.

As you share your feelings and give your partner suggestions, be humble and nonthreatening. Don't assume that you're always the offended one and that your spouse is the guilty one. Remember, too, that in many situations, it's not a matter of who is right and who is wrong—it's simply a matter of understanding each other.

I'd suggest that you avoid a written list of faults. This is a time when relying on memory is more considerate than reading a host of complaints. Another rule you might establish is for each of you to limit the number of suggestions you bring at one time—no more than two or three at most. That way the experience isn't as likely to be so overwhelming.

As you're the one receiving the suggestions, don't become defensive. Avoid the urge to say: "Don't nitpick! That doesn't happen very often!" Avoid the urge to ask for evidence that you're guilty: "When did I ever say that?" Recognize that if it's important enough for your companion to mention, it's something that is bothering him or her. And avoid the martyr's response: "You expect too much."

When your spouse suggests a way you can improve, you might respond by saying: "You're right. I should pick up my dirty clothes and keep the bedroom cleaner. Please forgive me—and please remind me when I forget. I appreciate your patience and help."

Then ask what else you can do to be a better partner, giving your companion a chance to bring up the other things he or she wants to talk about during the session.

After you've discussed those additional items, the tables are turned. It's time for the other partner to take the initiative and ask for suggestions for improvement.

The objective is to *understand each other's feelings*, to see things from the other person's point of view, and to discuss ways to resolve problems. Again, in many cases, it's not a matter of who is right or wrong; it's often just a matter of different habits and customs. But your willingness to talk about these matters and look for solutions shows a great deal of love and consideration.

Compromises are often necessary. As we compromise, we protect feelings and respect the other's right to be different. But items that *are* important are mentioned and resolved.

So, let's review this procedure proposed for your consideration and adaptation. After you have begun by expressing your love and appreciation for each other, your discussion might go something like this:

A husband asks: "Honey, what can I do to be a better husband? Be honest with me. I really want to know how I can improve."

His wife's response, given with kindness, might be: "There are a few little things that might help out. For example, you haven't seemed to notice, but lately you've contradicted me or disagreed with me several times in front of the children. That doesn't create a good atmosphere in our home, and it really confuses the children. I think it would be better for us and for them if we were more united."

The husband may not think he has really been guilty of this. But it does no good at all to be defensive and ask for specific illustrations of the last three times he has done this. If his wife thinks it's important enough to mention, he should realize that it's important enough for him to change his behavior.

He could say, "I'm sorry, dear, and I'll try to watch it. If you see this kind of situation developing, please help me by giving me a signal—such as saying that we haven't had a chance to discuss that subject alone yet."

Next, the wife might make the observation that her husband has been teasing a sensitive daughter too much about her boyfriends. Or she may remind him that the weekly date he promised as a New Year's resolution hasn't materialized.

Then it's her turn to ask, "Honey, what can I do to be a better wife?"

Her husband might then suggest with love that he has noticed several unbudgeted purchases lately, and encourage her to control impulse buying. Or he might mention that he prefers fried eggs to hard boiled, even if an article she read recently did caution against fried foods.

In such discussions between husband and wife, it is normal to point out many such details about living together. Some are of great consequence; others may seem trivial. But all are important for husband/wife harmony.

Turning to the Lord

Wisdom suggests that prayer is an important part of marriage. We must seek the Lord's help in understanding each other, resolving challenges, and reaching appropriate decisions—all without becoming defensive. Even more important, we must seek his help in changing our behavior and our hearts. As we invite the Lord to soften our hearts toward one another and as we sincerely repent of our weaknesses,

Wisdom suggests that prayer is an important part of marriage.

he will change our hearts. He will turn us from our selfish, petty, worldly attitudes and fill us with pure, Christlike love. No amount of talking and communicating will really resolve our differences unless our marriages are based upon true gospel principles, such as faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance, and obedience.

As we draw near to the Lord, he can help us grow closer to one another. Only through his grace can we be blessed with Christlike love—the ability to “love thy wife [or husband] with all thy heart, and . . . cleave unto her [or him] and none else” (D&C 42:22).