

Romantic Conflict

EMBRACING DESIRES THAT
BLESS NOT BRUISE



BRAD HAMBRICK

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series

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Abuse: Finding Hope in Christ

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Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes

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Brad Hambrick, Series Editor

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WHEN MANY COUPLES BEGIN to rehearse their arguments or their requests for romance, they begin to hear very familiar patterns. The following poem captures the rise and fall of common marital disagreements in the form of a Dr. Seuss book. Note the innocent beginning, rise to desperation, and bewildered conclusion.

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
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 unhappy.
"Happily ever after" now seems so sappy.
If this is 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?

How will we be able to enjoy the blessings God intended to provide through marriage without becoming consumed by our desire for them? Few marriages fall apart because of evil desires. Few embittered spouses seem crazy for wanting the things that have been neglected. But equally true is the reality that the good desires of well-meaning spouses will not always get along.

- The innocent desires of the introvert and the extrovert will clash even when no one is sinning.
- The desires of a spender and a saver, even when each is within the constraints of wisdom, will often clash.

- A “pleasant evening” will be different for someone who values time together than for someone who values productivity.

In a broken world with limited time and money, not every legitimate desire can be fulfilled. Often fulfilling one person’s desire results in neglecting another person’s. Unfortunately, we tend to quickly forget our blessings and long remember our sufferings. Our unmet desires bark louder than our fulfilled desires cheer.

- We remember a few harsh words better than many pleasant words.
- An omitted “Thank you” can speak louder in our emotions than many spoken expressions of gratitude.
- A well-spoken “Not tonight” can easily feel like “We never will.”

What we can say, with the clarity and pungency of a Dr. Seuss rhyme, is that often our hurts and disappointments may be real (authentic to our experience) but not true (accurately representing the situation). But things we tell ourselves persuasively and repeat to ourselves often become as real to us as “green eggs and ham” even if the result is marital food poisoning.

It may be surprising to many that Jesus’ foundational call to be a disciple addressed this very issue: how do we enjoy the good things God gives to us without becoming consumed by our desire for them (or by their momentary absence, or by their not arriving in our preferred style)?

These good things that God intends to provide through marriage exist at the intersection of conflict and romance. As we consider this essential intersection within married life, we will examine one primary passage: Luke 9:23–24.

And he 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 the course of this booklet we will go through this passage three times. First, we will walk through the straightforward 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.

The goal is more than to apply principles from Scripture to hard situations. Rather, our goal is to use Scripture as the lens by which we see ourselves, our spouses, our marriages, and our difficult moments of powerful change (for better or worse). As you read, be prepared for how vividly even two verses of Scripture can capture, reframe, and transform the most mundane, the most personal, and the most challenging moments of life.

TAKE ONE: THE SIMPLE MEANING OF THE PASSAGE

This is a painfully simple passage with a profoundly counterintuitive twist at the end. We will briefly look at eight points within these two verses in order to set the stage for “Take Two: Conflict” and “Take Three: Romance.”

“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, and so on. But that is not the case here. Based upon the words “all” and “anyone” there is only one category of people who can be exempt from this teaching: those who willfully reject Christ. Yet, as we will see, even those who choose not to follow Christ cannot escape the relational and emotional dynamics described in this passage.

“Come after . . . follow me”. There is no such thing as a good, married Christian who is a bad spouse. A premise of this booklet is that a good Christ-follower is, by definition, a good spouse-lover. Anyone who is marked by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), addresses her own faults before lovingly confronting others (Matt. 7:3–5), and puts the interest of others ahead of her own (Phil. 2:1–11) will be a great spouse. We must resist the tendency to treat marriage enrichment as if it were unrelated to the character transformation that occurs in basic discipleship.

“Deny himself”. The biggest obstacle to being a great spouse stares at each of us from the mirror every morning. Too often we become distracted and consumed by the things we cannot change and we turn a blind eye to the focal point of God’s primary work in our lives. A great marriage is hard for the same reason that the Christian life is hard: it requires us to deny ourselves and to accept by faith that change is needed and that God offers something better—in terms of quality, quantity, method, and sustainability—than our natural selves would pursue.

“Take up his cross daily”. A good marriage and the Christian life are not only hard; they are work. They are not something that we achieved (past tense verb) but something we surrender to (present tense verb) daily. We do not get to take a break from being a Christian or a good spouse. We need to remind ourselves continually that this work (daily denying self) is done in Christ’s strength, not ours, and that it is his performance and righteousness, not ours, that make us acceptable to God. The defining mark of both a Christian and a good spouse is willingness to learn to enjoy the daily transformation involved in each.

“Life”. This is *the* big question: “Where do you find life?” What gives you life? Who do you turn to in order to get life? We will come back to this question in “Take Two: Conflict”

"Brad Hambrick reveals that he knows *real* couples—you can tell he has fought on the front lines of marital counseling for years. Just as importantly, his writings reveal that he also knows how to handle Scripture. Combining these two skills is the perfect recipe for both a thoughtful and practical, as well as a true and helpful, discussion of marital conflict."

—GARY THOMAS, Author of *Sacred Marriage* and *A Lifelong Love*

REEVALUATING OUR DESIRES, REWRITING OUR CONFLICT

Few spouses have desires that are evil—but even the *good* desires of two well-meaning people do not always match up. Fulfilling one person's desires often means we must neglect another's, which can lead to conflict and bitterness. So how do we enjoy the blessings of marriage without being consumed by our desire for the blessings *we* prefer?

Brad Hambrick shows us that Jesus addressed this very issue in his foundational call to be a disciple. In this plan for dealing biblically with marital conflict, he walks us through Jesus' words and their implications, outlines a typical marital conflict, gives us strategies for how to "interrupt" our conflicts with grace and love, and gives us further tips on how to reignite romance going forward.

THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE booklet series by the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) applies the timeless hope of Christ to the unique struggles of modern believers.

"The gospel isn't just an ethereal idea. It's not a philosophy and it's not static. It moves and shapes and transforms. I am grateful for ABC's work of letting the gospel bear its weight on these real life sorrows and pains."

—MATT CHANDLER, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

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