

Self-Centered Spouse

HELP FOR CHRONICALLY
BROKEN MARRIAGES



BRAD HAMBRICK

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series

Self-Centered Spouse

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Self-Centered Spouse: Help for Chronically Broken Marriages

Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes

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Brad Hambrick, Series Editor

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WE ARE ALL SELF-CENTERED spouses who are married to self-centered spouses. That is what it means to be body-bound souls who always have ourselves as the center of our world and are corrupted by sin, most naturally thinking of our own interests. But there are cases when this “general self-centeredness” becomes chronic—severe to a point that results in a marital environment of either abuse or neglect.

In this booklet we will examine how Jesus directs his followers to respond to chronically broken relationships as we reflect primarily on Matthew 7:6—the culmination of the more classically understood text on relational conflict in Matthew 7:1–5.

PART ONE: TWO CASE STUDIES

Jim: The Passively Self-Centered Spouse

Jim wasn’t mean. He wasn’t harsh, violent, or cutting with his words. Even his wife would admit that Jim had to be really backed into a corner before she would see his temper; even then it was clear he was trying to “escape” instead of to “win.”

Jim was absent. He was distant, cold, and hard to get to know. More than being an introvert, Jim had a hard time relating to people. Emotions, even his own, made him uncomfortable. He could work with people on a project, but had very few friends.

His sense of humor and interests were either private or hard to translate to other people. Science, music, writing, art, television, and technology that could be mastered were the things he enjoyed. These interests shared one thing in common: they didn’t require other people.

Having a family was hard for Jim. He thought of his family as “them” and “him”—they a circle of people connected to one another and he a dot by himself.

Whenever guilt or his wife's nagging drove him to spend time with the family, it never went well. It was usually awkward until he got angry. Then it was over—usually for several months. It would always be hard to figure out what had gone wrong. Afterward everyone had a strikingly different version of what had happened.

Even the most innocent dinner table “conversations” (i.e., two or three forced exchanges when his wife tried to get him to talk to the kids) could turn into tense moments. Afterward, when his wife tried to restore the peace, Jim's interpretation of what his wife had wanted him to say or do didn't fit the situation well at all.

The same thing would happen on the rare occasions when he told his wife about a conversation at work or church. Jim's interpretation of what had been said would always leave him feeling offended or pressured. When his wife would try to comfort him by saying that the comments were normal, or even complimentary, the conversation would be over because “obviously” she “knew everything” and he was “an idiot.”

His wife alternated between thinking she was crazy and wondering whether he was crazy. Her confusion and despair just felt like judgment and shame to Jim—the only social and emotional cues he seemed to be able to read.

When his wife hounded him long enough, Jim would read a book on marriage or parenting. He would try for a couple of days, once even for several weeks, to dutifully follow the rules in “her books.” Eventually they went to a few counselors. Jim would listen, but all the talk about what it takes to be in a “healthy relationship” seemed foreign.

Eventually Jim grew cynical to it all—books, counseling, marriage, parenting, and emotions. As his cynicism grew, he withdrew further into himself. He would provide for and stay with his family, but that was all he had to give. Occasionally he would say that he felt like his family took advantage of his hard work and didn't care for him. But when they would offer to do

something with him, the awkwardness that followed would prove that he was angry at the symptom (feeling taken advantage of), not the cause (being unable to enjoy his family, even when they tried to engage him).

Eddie: The Aggressive Self-Centered Spouse

Eddie was good and well liked from a distance, but he was not nice at home. If you watched Eddie from a distance, you would see that he was successful at many (or maybe most) of the things he did. If you heard Eddie speak to a group or in a casual conversation, you would walk away impressed.

This meant that most people who casually knew Eddie liked him. But most people who knew Eddie only knew him casually. When something went wrong at home, Eddie used this popularity and success as “evidence” that he could not be the problem.

Making matters worse, his quick wit and ever-confident demeanor overpowered his wife and children. Conflict, which made them uncomfortable, didn’t affect Eddie, so he could talk circles around them. When they cried he told them they were too emotional. When they got angry he dismissed their words as irrational.

The same was true with counselors. On the couple of occasions when his wife forced him to counseling, Eddie was the owner of all the relevant information; it was “his life.” When the counselors asked questions (as they must), he exploited their information deficiency to put them on the defensive and to convince himself that the counselors had nothing of value to say to him.

When one counselor said that Eddie was harsh and insensitive, he concluded that the counselor didn’t know him well enough to make those kinds of “judgments.” When the other counselor tried to be neutral, Eddie moved the conversation to his wife’s issues and then decided that he was not upset enough to push counseling for those concerns.

Either way his wife was left alone. In the first case, Eddie left counseling angry about how she had tried to make him look

awful—how could she disrespect him so? In the second case, she left thinking that she was crazy and that the counselor had agreed.

But it hadn't been that different from most private "conversations" with Eddie. The problem was that only his wife and a few other people ever had private conversations with him. His wife and kids were the only ones who were stuck trying to make the irrational rational and solve riddles with no answers.

Eddie's primary tools were questions that created defensiveness or insecurity, subject changes that seemed plausible but made the other person sound unfair, and leveraging sources of power (e.g., money, authority, success, Bible verses, and so on) to end conversations that weren't going his way.

Why all the arguing? The problem was that the answer was rarely obvious. When something trivial didn't go Eddie's way, he could make the trivial seem essential or like a sign of great disrespect. When Eddie made a mistake he would minimize it, blame-shift, or attack. His wife was left to choose between (a) speaking and escalating argument or (b) being silent and perpetuating misinformation.

Eddie defined his own world. If you casually passed through Eddie's world, it was interesting and compelling. If you lived in Eddie's world, it was a punishing prison. It appeared functional to outsiders, and many people liked Eddie, so there was no way (in his mind) that he could be as bad as the hurt, fear, and anger he saw in his wife's eyes indicated.

PART TWO: ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

If we were talking *to* Jim or Eddie, instead of *about* them, doubtless we would hear the rebuttal, "This can't be all me. Counselors always take the side of the crying woman. She's not that innocent. What about all the stuff she does that upsets me?"

This poses a legitimate dilemma. No spouse is ever completely innocent, yet we have focused on Jim and Eddie to such

a degree that we have not even given names to their wives.¹ Is this counselor bias? Is it a violation of the biblical teaching to remove the log of one's own sin before reaching for the other person's speck of sin (Matt. 7:3–5)?

No, rather, it is the direct application of Matthew 7:6 as Jesus' intended conclusion to Matthew 7:1–5. In this passage Jesus is dealing with troubled relationships in three stages, which move from minor offenses in broad relationships to major offenses in close relationships.

Stage One: Minor Offense, Broad Relationships (vv. 1–2)

Leading into these verses, Jesus had been teaching for two chapters on the moral ideal (Matt. 5–6). Listening to Jesus dissect the human heart must have been convicting. Doubtless many listeners wanted to apply his message to a friend who “needed it more than they did.” Jesus cut them off at the pass, and he says here (paraphrased), “Whatever standard you use to apply my teaching to others, God will apply to you. Give the grace you need to receive.”

You can imagine someone raising his hand and sincerely asking Jesus, “Teacher, I’ve tried that. Usually it works very well (when I am willing to apply it), but I have some relationships that don’t get better. It feels like I’m being asked to ignore important offenses. I understand it is a man’s ‘glory to overlook an offense’ (Prov. 19:11), but is that the only way your followers can respond to offenses?”

Stage Two: Moderate Offense, Closer Relationship (vv. 3–5)

Jesus takes up that question and answers it by changing the metaphor from judging to logs and specks (paraphrased): “Start by admitting your sin before you confront someone else’s. Model what it looks like to live by the grace you want him to embrace. Create an environment that sets up reconciliation. Besides, if you don’t, you’re a hypocrite.”

1. The fact that Eddie and Jim are males is not meant to imply that all or most self-centered spouses are male. Self-centeredness is not a struggle rooted in gender. In this booklet we will use the male and female pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*, *his*, and *hers*) interchangeably to represent this.

"Gives sound biblical wisdom for how to recognize [abusive] patterns and practical guidelines for how to address and tackle them."

—LESLIE VERNICK, licensed counselor, author of *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*

"Overflows with wisdom, hope, and compassion for the abused or neglected spouse as well as for the offending spouse."

—JUSTIN HOLCOMB, coauthor of *Is It My Fault?* and *Rid of My Disgrace*

HOPE FOR GENUINE CHANGE

Anyone who is married is already a self-centered spouse . . . but when this all-too-common sin becomes severe and chronic, it results in a marital environment of abuse or neglect—leaving the victimized spouse feeling trapped and hopeless. But how might this hopelessness change if we knew that Jesus addressed just such chronically broken relationships?

Brad Hambrick examines Jesus' teachings about relationships to show us how we can turn the other cheek while keeping away from unhealthy and destructive paths. He identifies different types of self-centered spouses to show us what we are dealing with, shares strategies for interacting with them, and points to evidences of genuine change to bring hope to anyone living with a chronically self-centered spouse.

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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