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what to do when your marriage is falling apart

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tough love

By now, you may be saying, “But, Dr. Chapman, what about me? I can’t talk to my spouse or be kind to him. I have had to take the children and move out for my own safety.” Or I think of Tim, whom we met in the beginning of this book. Tim is the victim of repeated verbal abuse. What do we say to Tim?

Let me make it clear: *Some things are not permissible in a marriage.* When physical abuse, sexual unfaithfulness, sexual abuse of children, alcoholism, or drug addiction persist in a marriage, it is time to take loving action. In fact, one is not loving when they accept such behavior as a way of life. Love is always concerned about the well-being of the other person. It is not loving to accept this behavior and do nothing. Such behavior is destroying the individual and the marriage. Love must confront. That’s tough love. And that’s real love.

Confronting—and Redeeming

In the Bible, confronting is always seen as redemptive. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone,” Jesus says in Matthew 18:15 (ESV). “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother”—

won him over. The hope of confronting is that the relationship might be restored.

We know, however, that repentance is not always the response of the offender. Jesus goes on to say, “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”—that is, a pagan (Matthew 18:16–17). How do you treat a pagan? You pray for him. You reach out to witness to him of God’s grace, but you do not accept his sinful behavior. Upon repentance, you are fully ready to forgive and restore. In fact, that is the desired outcome of confronting.

So first, we go to the individual privately. We share not only our displeasure with the person’s behavior, but we affirm that such behavior is sinful. It violates the laws God established for marriage and family. We urge the person to return to God and to turn from his or her destructive behavior. We assure the spouse that we love him or her too much to sit idly by. We cannot condone such behavior. If the spouse repents, we forgive and continue to grow in the marriage.

If the individual refuses to deal with the sinful behavior, we share the situation with two or three others, and they go with us to confront him or her again. These should be trusted, mature people who understand how to be kind but firm. Perhaps the knowledge that others are aware of the situation will motivate the spouse to reach out for help in breaking destructive patterns. If they are willing to go for counseling, then the process should be started as soon as possible. And it should continue as long

as necessary until the counselor and both the husband and wife agree that the problem has been dealt with in a comprehensive manner. With individual counseling and the support of a caring Christian family, destructive patterns can be changed. Marriages can be restored.

The third level of confrontation is to share it with the church. When the spouse does not see the need to repent after you have confronted your spouse and two or three others also have, then the church becomes involved. Usually this begins by telling a pastor or staff member as a representative of the church. The pastoral leader takes a representative group from the church and again confronts the erring spouse. Perhaps now he or she will respond positively to the help that is being offered and the process of healing can begin.

While this may seem too much to ask, and some pastors may not be willing to get involved, it is clearly the biblical pattern. In my experience, it is often the visit of the pastor or elders that God uses to touch the heart of the spouse and begin the process of reconciliation.

If there is still no willingness to deal with the problem, we are told to treat the individual, in a sense, as a non-Christian. If we apply this principle to the marriage relationship, does this mean separation? In my opinion, that would certainly be one alternative. The purpose is still redemptive. The separation is for the purpose of creating a crisis that we hope will urge the spouse to take constructive action. We pray for them, love them, and stand ready to receive them when they turn from their destructive behavior.

Separation as an Act of Love

Some Christians see separation as always a sinful action. In reality, it may sometimes be the most loving action one can take. Let me illustrate.

Joyce was waiting outside the lecture hall where I was to speak. As I approached, I could tell that she had her eye on me. “You’re Dr. Chapman, aren’t you?” she asked. No need to pose as Gary Smalley at that point, so I confessed. She continued, “I’ve been waiting for you because I have a question about your lecture last night. Your talk on love was very painful for me. I’ve been separated from my husband for three months. I have a question I want to ask. Is there ever a time to stop loving?”

“Why do you ask?” I replied.

“My husband physically and emotionally abused me for eight years. He refused to work. I supported the family for seven years. Then I got sick. Even then he refused to get a job.”

“Was he able to work?” I inquired.

“As able as I was. He was working when we married. Six months later, he lost his job and would never take the initiative to look for another. I was working, so he stayed home with the children and watched TV. Mainly he watched TV. He still expected me to do all the cooking. Even when the youngest child started school, he still wouldn’t look for a job.

“I just got tired of it. I gave and gave with nothing in return. I got to the place where I had no more love to give. Was I wrong to stop loving him?”

“Maybe you didn’t stop loving him,” I said. “Maybe you are loving him more now than before. As I understand the biblical

concept of love, it is looking out for another person's interests. It is putting their well-being above your own."

She interrupted, "That's what I did for all those years, Dr. Chapman, but I couldn't do it any longer."

"I understand that was your intention all those years," I said, "but I'm not sure your behavior was all that loving. In reality, you helped him live an irresponsible lifestyle. Did you really help him? Was it really beneficial to him? You made it possible for him to live without working, whereas the Bible says that 'if a man will not work, he shall not eat' [2 Thessalonians 3:10 NIV]. Your actions helped him violate that basic biblical principle."

I could tell this was not the way Joyce expected this conversation to go. I continued, "Now in separating you have taken a step to help him follow this principle. You have said, 'I will no longer encourage you to disobey the Bible. I can't make you work, but I will not help you shirk responsibility.' Who knows, he may get a job."

"Oh, he has already promised that he will get a job and will be kind to me if I will come back," she said.

"Then let's see if he follows through on his promise. Let him get a job and let him go with you to see a pastor or a counselor to discuss the abuse problems. In time, perhaps you can have a healthy, biblical marriage. But let him know that you will not come back until these things are dealt with thoroughly. You must have some evidence that things can be different. Do you understand why I would say that you may be loving him more effectively now than before? Don't misunderstand me. I am not encouraging divorce. I am saying that love uses confrontation as a means of trying to help.

Some Christians define love as totally placating the mate's desires without regard to his or her behavior. This is something that God Himself does not do.

“Love says to a husband, ‘I love you too much to help you do wrong. I will not sit here and let you destroy yourself and me by cursing me every night. I cannot make you stop cursing, but I will not be here to receive it tonight. If you want to make our lives better, then I am open. But I won’t be a part of letting you destroy me.’

“Your attitude is not to be one of abandonment but of love,” I continued. “To answer your original question, there is never a time to stop loving someone, but there is a time to start expressing that love in a different, more effective manner. Love is not letting someone step on you. Love is caring so much for their well-being that you refuse to play into their sick behavior. Many people are healed when someone loves them enough to stand up to their inappropriate actions.”

God’s Tough Love

God is our best model in this kind of boundary-setting love. Over and over again, we read passages similar to the following words to Israel:

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his covenant of

love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—your grain, new wine and olive oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you. (Deuteronomy 7:12–13 NIV)

If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. (Deuteronomy 8:19 NIV)

Such boundary setting has been interpreted by some as non-Christian and unloving. In reality, it is love at its best. Without boundaries, all of life becomes confusing. “Good fences make good neighbors,” poet Robert Frost wrote.¹ That’s not just good poetry; it’s good sense. Some things are not permitted in a marriage. Love is willing to draw a line and refuse to accept the behavior as normal. Such tough love may not lead to reconciliation, but it is a responsible and loving action.

Some Christians define love as totally placating the mate’s desires without regard to his or her behavior. This is something that God Himself does not do. It is true that God loves us unconditionally, but it is not true that His approach is the same whether we obey or disobey His commands. He has established boundaries, and when we are true to these boundaries, we experience “blessing.” When we violate or rebel, He loves too much to be silent.

Sometimes in the name of love or out of fear, we put up

with destructive behavior in a spouse until we come to hate the person. Then we take action out of self-defense. How much healthier to take action earlier in the relationship while we still have emotional energy with which to endure the process. “Putting up” with sinful behavior is never God’s way. He loves too deeply for that.

The earlier we can clarify boundaries and respond when they are violated, the better. We cannot have the benefits of a warm, loving relationship unless we are willing to be responsible for our own behavior.

What about Abuse?

Perhaps you have separated—or are seriously considering it—due to physical or verbal abuse, sexual unfaithfulness, sexual abuse of children, alcohol or drug abuse—or some other behavior expressly condemned in Scripture. If so, let me encourage you to work closely with a pastor or Christian counselor in determining where you should go from here. Your act of separating may have been a conscious act of tough love or it may have been simply an act of self-preservation. Whatever the case, you would profit from the perspective of a professional who has had experience in helping spouses respond to such abusive situations.

You will face many questions during your separation. If there has been a pattern of physical abuse or sexual abuse of children, do you allow the spouse you have left to come back into the house for a visit? In my opinion, not until there has been considerable counseling and the counselor agrees that such a visit would be safe. A promise to change is not enough in these cases. Promises have been made before. Real change in established pat-

terns of abuse is not likely to occur without extensive counseling and the help of the Holy Spirit. Remember, our goal is reconciliation, not simply getting back together. Getting back together without dealing with real problems is almost certain disaster.

Tough love may seem to be harsh, but it is sometimes necessary. Firmness with kindness is the proper approach. We cannot be reconciled with an abusive spouse until the abuse has been dealt with thoroughly. We must be open to walk the long road of healing, but we dare not ignore the abuse. Ignored abuse only escalates. Better to set the firm boundary of tough love now than later. Later may be too late!

GROWTH ASSIGNMENTS

1. Which of the following were part of your spouse's behavior in your marriage? (Put his or her initials by the ones that apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> physical abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> verbal abuse
<input type="checkbox"/> sexual abuse of children	<input type="checkbox"/> sexual unfaithfulness
<input type="checkbox"/> alcohol abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> drug abuse
<input type="checkbox"/> other _____	

2. Which of the above were part of your own behavior in your marriage? (Put your initials by the ones that apply.)
3. What steps have you taken to deal with your own destructive behavior?
4. What steps has your spouse taken to deal with their destructive behavior?

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5. If any of the above are established patterns in either of your lives, there can be authentic reconciliation only after these behavior patterns have been changed. Almost always, this will require the help of a pastor or professional counselor. If you are not yet seeing a pastor or counselor, you may want to take steps immediately to find such a person and make an appointment.

Also, make sure that your spouse understands that there can be no reconciliation without counseling. Tell them that promises of change are not enough. If your spouse is serious, he or she will be willing to seek help.

6. If your spouse is not willing to go for counseling about these destructive behavior patterns, then you may want to secure your own counselor so you will have help in knowing how to set tough-love boundaries with your spouse.

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