

What Do You Do When Your Marriage Goes Sour?

by Jay E Adams

Phil and Emily had not come for help in solving the problems in their marriage although they had called the chaplain to ask for marriage counseling. Actually, their minds already were made up—they had decided to get a divorce. Yet, they were Christians and they knew that a divorce was wrong since they had no biblical grounds for it. There had been no adultery, no desertion; only untold misery. "If we can only get him to agree that going on in this marriage would be an impossibility," they thought, "then perhaps he will be able to show us how in our case God will make an exception to His law." That was how they were reasoning inwardly when they first told their stories to Chaplain Cunningham.

"So you see," Emily concluded, "there is simply nothing left to our marriage. I don't feel a thing for Phil anymore; there is nothing to build on." Phil ended his remarks in a similar vein: "Well, I suppose that it has been a long time since you've heard a story like that chaplain. And, while we don't agree on many things, I must say that Emily is absolutely correct when she claims that there is nothing left to our marriage—every drop of love that I once had for her has drained away." They both sat back in an uneasy confidence, knowing down deep that divorce was wrong, but sure that they had spoken the last word on the issue. After all what else could the chaplain advise if there was no more feeling, no more love, nothing left? They waited, hoping that he, rather than they, would pronounce the final verdict: "If there is nothing left to your marriage, I suppose that there is nothing you can do but get a divorce." They hoped that hearing him utter these or similar words would somehow remove the bad feelings triggered by their guilty consciences. What they really wanted was salve for their souls.

"I am truly sorry to hear about your difficult times and the sorry state in which you find yourselves at present. I can understand why you have come for help. When a marriage has gone sour and you find that all of your own efforts to try to sweeten it again fail, then you do need help. You say that there is no love and no feeling left? That's serious. If you don't love each other, there is only one thing to do. ("Here it comes" they thought; "He will advise a divorce.") You will have to learn how to love one another."

Learn how to love?" They retorted almost simultaneously. "What do you mean learn how to love?" asked Phil as soon as he was able to regain some measure of composure. "Yeah," offered Emily, cynically, "How can you learn it? You can't produce feelings out of thin air."

"I was not talking about feelings" said Chaplain Cunningham. "I was talking about love. The two are not identical even though Hollywood, the T. V and Playboy might say otherwise. Love is not feeling first. Before all else it is the determination to do good for another person because God has told you to do so. Love begins, therefore, with a desire to please God. Love toward another is a willingness to give to him whatever you have that he needs, because you know that God wants you to. Where true love exists, the feeling follows soon enough."

"Well, that certainly isn't what I thought you would say," Phil replied. "Nor I," echoed Emily. "As a matter of fact," she continued, "I'm dubious about the whole thing; how can you teach someone to love? And what does it mean to learn to love?"

"Let me begin by explaining a bit about biblical love and how it can be learned. First, notice that everywhere in the Bible God commands us to love. You don't command people to have certain feelings do you?"

"Well. . . ?"

"For instance, if I gave the order 'Emily, be angry' you couldn't turn on anger just like that, could you?"

"... I suppose not."

"Then, listen to these verses in the Bible: 'Love the Lord your God. . . Love your neighbor as yourself! Those are commands; God commands love. If love were feeling first, it could not be commanded. Do you see that?"

"I think that I do," said Phil. "But what does that have to do with us?"

"Everything, Phil. You see, God orders you to love your wife. Listen to what He wrote through the apostle Paul: 'Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25). Remember, Christ died on the cross for the Church."

"Do you mean that I have to learn how to love Emily enough to be willing to die for her?"

"Exactly!"

"Then, forget it; I could never learn to love her like that."

"No, we can't forget it because God commands it. But perhaps you could begin at a lesser level. The Bible also commands "love your neighbor—she's the closest one that you've got. You eat with her, sleep with her. . . ."

"I couldn't even love her that way!"

"And I couldn't love him that way either!"

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but there is still hope. The Bible also insists upon love even at what for you would be the lowest level. God commands: 'Love your enemies.' You see, there is no way out. You must learn to love each other; God commands it."

"Oh no!"

"No!"

"Yes. And, as a matter of fact there is great hope since God commands love; He never commands anything of His children that He does not supply both the directions and the power to achieve."

"Oh my! We came to you to help us find a way out of this miserable marriage and you have tied us into it even more tightly. Thanks—for nothing!"

"Yeah, nothing."

"Hang on, I haven't finished. If you really want to get rid of the misery, I can help you do so. But you will never find a way out by breaking up the marriage. As a matter of fact, you are only heading for greater troubles if you take that route. You can't rebel against God and expect things to go well: "The way of the transgressor is hard." You will never find peace by pursuing it, or happiness by seeking it or relief from misery by trying to get out from under it. These things are by-products that always elude those who chase them. They come only to those who instead focus upon pleasing God rather than themselves. If you repent of the sin that you have committed in your hearts in determining to put an end to this marriage and if you will let me help you learn how to do what God says, sooner than you have any idea, peace and joy will come.

But let me make one thing plain: you cannot do what God commands just to get rid of your misery; you must do it first and foremost to please Him."

"Well, we do want to please God. As a matter of fact, that is why we came because we knew what we were planning to do was wrong. We hoped that you could make it right somehow, but I suppose that isn't possible."

"No, it isn't Emily. But I do appreciate your honesty in saying what you have just said."

"But how is it possible to put a marriage as bad as ours together again? Of course we'd like to see that most of all, yet it doesn't seem realistic. Aren't you promising a lot more than you can deliver, chaplain?"

"I know that it may sound unrealistic to you Phil, but if you mean business with God, and do as He says, I promise that within six to eight weeks you can have a marriage that sings!"

"That sounds too good to be true."

"I know it does, but I've seen it happen often enough to know that it is true. But, I warn you, it will not happen through talking and good resolutions alone. God will settle for no pious platitudes. He wants action; He demands change. Much of that change will be hard; you won't always like what God tells you to do. But you must do it anyway—simply because He says so. You won't always understand why He tells you to do what He says, but you must do it anyway—just to please Him. There are concrete things to do. And the very first is to ask God's forgiveness, and then, forgiveness from each other. What do you say?"

"I suppose that there is no other way. . . ."

"I want to give it a try; I never really wanted our marriage to break up."

"Good. Now let me make perfectly clear to you the basic biblical dynamic of love. Love is not feeling first, we have seen. Rather, it is first manifested through giving. Feeling is self-centered; love focuses upon another. Listen to this: 'God so loved the world that He gave His unique son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' (John 3:16); 'He loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20); and remember the verse from Ephesians that I quoted before that contains the words '. . . as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.' In every one of those vital verses concerning the love of Jesus Christ, which is the model for all love between a husband and wife, love is tied to giving, never to feeling. That is therefore where you must begin; you must learn how to give.

You must give to one another all that you have that the other needs. It will not always be easy since you have developed patterns of wanting and expecting and demanding rather than patterns of giving. All of that will have to change. And you will have to learn to give even when the other party is not very loving or lovable toward you. Remember, Jesus Christ gave Himself for sinners, for rebels, for enemies. You know that you can too because He told us to "do good" for our enemies. 'If your enemy hungers... give', if he thirst... give' He said. He did not say "First, feel loving toward him, then give." No, quite simply He said "give." If we had to wait till we felt warm and benevolent toward an enemy before giving him something to eat or drink, the chances are that he'd die of hunger or thirst waiting. We are to give; give him whatever he needs—because God says so, whether we feel like it or not."

"But doesn't that make us hypocrites if we do things for one another when we don't feel like it?"

"No Emily, again you are thinking according to a feeling oriented view of life rather than the biblical one. Hypocrisy is not determined by whether you feel like doing something or not. In spite of what some people say today, you should do whatever God tells you to do to please Him, whether you feel like it or not."

"I sure don't understand that chaplain; you'd better fill me in."

"O. K., it's like this. The very first thing that I did this morning was something that I didn't feel like doing, something that I did not want to do—I got up! Did that make me a hypocrite?"

"No, of course not."

"Neither will it make you a hypocrite to give in love to another even when you don't feel like it. I would be a hypocrite only if I went about telling everyone that I enjoyed getting up when, in fact, I do not. It is not hypocrisy to do something that God commands against our feelings so long as we don't misrepresent our true motives. The reason that I get up is because I know that to be responsible to God and to my employer I must do so. The reason you give in love basically ought to be the same: because you want to please God and thereby become a responsible husband (or wife) in His sight. So long as you do not attribute your actions to false motives like, 'I am trying to please you honey because you mean so much to me,' no hypocrisy is involved."

"Well, I certainly never thought about it that way before. But, you said that we would have to start with forgiveness. Suppose that I do not feel like forgiving Phil? Does the same thing hold?"

"Yes, now you are beginning to catch on. Forgiveness is not feeling first either. It is fundamentally a promise. When you put your faith in Christ as your Savior, God promised to remember your sins against you no more. That does not mean that He forgets; God never forgets anything. What it means is that He never brings up those sins to use them against you again. When you forgive one another, therefore, you are promising to do three things about his wrong doings.

You promise:

1. I shall not use them against you in the future.
2. I shall not talk to others about them.
3. I shall not dwell on them myself.

Just as the only way to begin to feel right toward another is to begin to do right toward him, so the only way to feel properly toward another, and ultimately even to forget those wrongs that he has done to you, is to keep the threefold promise that you make when you say 'I forgive you.' You see, you don't have to feel forgiving in order to grant forgiveness; you just have to forgive. Against all feelings to the contrary, Christ told us that we must forgive a brother seven times a day if he comes saying 'I repent' (Luke 17:4). Does that clarify things for you?"

"Whew, I'm afraid so; I'm of the opinion that it clarifies too much! I just don't think that either Emily or I have what it takes to do these things."

"Well, it is really most encouraging to hear you say so because this is not something that you can do in your own strength, yet neither is it something that you can sit around waiting for God to give you the strength to do before you do it. In that same chapter of Luke's gospel, the disciples replied to Jesus' instructions about forgiving seven times a day with these words: 'Lord give us more faith.' That sounded pious enough on the surface, but what it amounted to was a pious cop out. Jesus treated it with disdain. He retorted: 'If

you have faith like a mustard seed you can say to this mountain, 'be uprooted and be planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.' Don't you see what He meant? He was saying 'You don't need anything more. Even the faith that you have is enough to work wonders if you will only exercise it in obedience.' The same is true of you and Emily, Phil. The two of you have been saved. You have trusted in the death and resurrection of Christ and have come to know the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life. You have the very Spirit of God indwelling you. It is perfectly true that you yourselves can't obey. But you don't have to do so out of your own resources. You do not need anything more. All of God's resources are available to you already as you step out in obedience to do whatever God says in the Bible. If genuinely, prayerfully, believingly you obey God, Jesus, who promised that 'through Him' you can do 'all things' (Philippians 4:13), Himself will give you the strength. More often than not that strength comes in the doing so that those who disobediently sit around waiting for it rather than moving ahead in obedient faith to do as God requires fail to receive it. Every commandment of God should give His children hope, since—as I pointed out— God never asks His children to do anything that He does not provide both the instructions and the strength to accomplish".

"Well, I can see that God has anticipated a lot more about these matters than I had thought. I believe that I am beginning to get some hope; if the Bible gives us all of this then perhaps it does have more to say about the solution to our other problems than I had ever dreamed."

"Right Phil! Only let's be entirely clear about this matter; the Bible doesn't have merely more answers to your problems, it has all of the answers to all of them. In His Word, God has given us 'Everything pertaining to life and godliness' (2 Peter 1:3)."

"Well, I'm interested too. How do we get started? Where do we go from here?"

"Good. In a few moments I'm going to lay out some homework assignments for you to do during the week after you have sought full forgiveness from God and from one another (and I want to talk to you about how to do this properly too before we finish). But before we go any further, there is one other matter about which I want to say a word or two. Phil, let me return to that verse in Ephesians 5:25 once more. Remember, God commands 'Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church?' Well, throughout that section of the chapter, one thing is clear—again and again the husband (not the wife) is commanded to love. If there is no love in your home, then it is primarily your fault and it is your responsibility to see to it that love is generated, is maintained and grows."

"Now I'm getting hope too!"

"I'm glad about that Emily, because there are responsibilities pertaining to you in the passage also. I shall get around to those in time. But, to continue, Paul points out that the man is the head of his home as Christ is the Head of the church. That means that He is primarily responsible for seeing to it that there is love in the home. Headship has its authority, but we shall begin with its responsibilities. To sum up what God says, headship is the responsibility to take loving leadership in the home. And this leadership must follow the model provided by Christ in His loving headship over His church. In short, every married Christian has both the privilege and the obligation to exhibit the relationship between Christ and the Church. And Phil, you know very well that it was not the church that first reached out to Christ in love. Indeed, in 1 John 4:19 we read 'We (the church) love because He first loved us.' And, incidentally, that love was out of pure grace; there was nothing in us

to commend us to God. He, of His own volition determined to set His love upon us. So Phil, whenever you find it difficult to show love, remember that it was not easy for God either."

"I've always wanted to be the head of my home, but I've never known how to begin."

"And I've wanted him to assume the responsibilities of headship."

"Well, in the assignments that I shall give you, there will be plenty for you to do to that will give you a good start this week. Now Emily, while God does not require love of you as the essence of your role in the home, He does insist upon submission: 'As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands' (Ephesians 5:24). Now let me explain what this means. I think that you are going to discover that there are some surprises connected with this command. As a matter of fact, the road to the fulfillment that we hear so much about today lies in this valley. To begin with. . . "

You have read enough to know that there is hope. Phil and Emily are just two of the thousands who this year will find help for their marriage from truly Christian counseling. How about your marriage... has it begun to turn sour too? There is hope. But that hope can be found nowhere but in Christ.

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