

4 Spirit-Empowered Ways to Contend for Your Marriage

There are two opposite and equally destructive strategies many husbands and wives fall into when it comes to seeking marital happiness. The first is trying to take charge of your spouse. The second is assuming your spouse will take charge of your marriage. But the only truly effective way to get closer to the meaningful, connected and happy relationship you want is for you to take charge of your marriage.

Notice how different that is from taking charge of your spouse. Another way to make the same point would be to say, Take responsibility for your marriage. Micromanaging or manipulating won't work. And neither will sitting back and waiting for things to change. You've got a lot more power than you think!

There are some wrong ways to do this, and some powerfully effective and godly ways to do this. Here they are.

What Doesn't Work

Hopefully you've learned by now that you can't change your spouse. (If you're still trying, how's that working out for you?) And yet countless marriages are made miserable by such attempts at control. I know these couples personally: the pastor who so manipulates and demeans his wife that she cowers in fear and hardly speaks or the middle-aged wife who so criticizes and speaks harshly to her financially successful husband that he is reluctant ever to come home from work.

Husbands and wives write to me all the time complaining about what their spouse does or doesn't do. "He always misunderstands what I say." "Nothing I do is ever good enough for her." "He's never interested in intimacy; I need to feel wanted." "She constantly refuses sex, and I can't take it

anymore.” The problem is my spouse, and if only they would change, everything would be OK.

Can you see how these approaches are decidedly unhelpful? It’s not that your spouse shouldn’t do things differently. And it’s not about you heaping loads of guilt and shame onto yourself. It’s about applying the Serenity Prayer to your marriage; putting your focus on what you can control and doing something about it, while leaving what you cannot change in God’s hands.

And in case that doesn’t ring a bell in your mind, here’s the opening to the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

What does that look like in marriage?

Four Ways to Contend for Your Marriage

So what does work? Here are four suggestions. And I guarantee that if you put these into practice, your marriage will change.

1. Get Honest

Reality can be uncomfortable. It’s important to ask, What’s really going on? What brokenness have I brought into the situation? What brokenness is my spouse bringing? Are there additional factors contributing to our misery, such as addiction or abuse? (If so, get some help right away!) Where have my words, attitudes, behaviors, baggage, misunderstanding, communication and so on added to the problem? Who is my spouse, really? Blindness or denial is never helpful.

While such an honest assessment of your relationship can be challenging, it can also be very empowering. To at least

whatever degree you contributed to the problem, you can now contribute to the solution. Getting honest about your spouse also allows you to clarify whether they are a person of goodwill with some troubling behaviors, or whether they are acting out of an evil heart.

Most of all, intentionally seek God's perspective on your circumstances. That will be the most helpful honesty of all.

2. **Change Yourself**

The only person you can make decisions for is yourself. As one of Dr Henry Cloud's CEO clients said to him, "Well, I guess I am ridiculously in charge!" (more in *Boundaries for Leaders*.) You may not be in charge of a company, but you are in charge of you. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." No one, not even your spouse, can make you feel any certain way or do any certain thing unless you allow them to do so. (Again, if abuse is going on, get some help right away!)

If you're a frustrated husband, do you need to up your game in loving your wife like Christ? If you're an unhappy wife, are you using your beauty and strength to build up or to destroy? If you struggle with communication, are you learning the skills necessary to do this well? That which is in your power to do may seem small, but if you make a change your marriage will change—often for the better.

In marriage, your spouse also gets a vote. Your actions are not the only factor. But do what you can. The results may surprise you.

3. **Choose to Move Closer**

How long are you going to sit there waiting for your spouse to come your direction? You make the first move. Invest regularly in your relationship. Husbands, survey your relationship for what may be keeping your wife at a distance and do the hard

work of addressing the problem. Reach out and take her hand. Plant a kiss on her cheek. Wives, make the mental decision to move in your husband's direction. Draw him out. Listen.

If you feel as though you've tried to do everything to get your spouse to connect with no positive results, step back and look at things from your spouse's perspective. Are you trying to force connection, or are you inviting them into a safe place? Have you invested the energy necessary to learn about your spouse such that you can frame your invitations in a way they would find appealing? If you were in your spouse's shoes, would you want to come closer to you?

Choose to have an open heart. If your heart is closed right now, do the necessary work to get to an open heart.

4. Keep God Involved

God can and does restore anything and everything where He is given that opportunity. Remember that in your marriage your spouse also has a vote. But make sure that as far as lies with you, God is invited into and freely able to operate in your relationship. Make sure that there is nothing in your own heart that would limit God's freedom in bringing restoration.

Are you praying regularly with your spouse? That can be challenging, but you can learn to do it. Talking about your spiritual lives together can be important. Here are some tips to help you do that. Without God's involvement you are two broken people who are extremely unlikely to make things work. Invite Him to be the glue holding you together. That's your only chance.

I know if you take charge of your marriage in these ways, your relationship will be dramatically different. You just might be surprised at the positive results.

Your Turn: Where have you tried to manipulate and control? Where have you waited for your spouse to act first? What can

you do this week to step up your game in taking charge of your marriage? Leave a comment below. {eoa}

Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley is both a board-certified OB-GYN physician and an ordained doctor of ministry. As an author and speaker, she loves helping people discover the Fully Alive kind of life that Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

This article originally appeared at .