

Cleaning Relational Plaque Out of Your Marriage

All of you know the feeling you get if, for some reason, you forget to brush your teeth in the morning.

Most of the time you're faithful to that daily ritual of brushing your teeth. But what a feeling you can get if you forget to brush! You end up having that unclean feeling in your mouth called plaque. Plaque buildup in a dental sense is not particularly pleasant.

Our bodies in many ways reflect great spiritual and practical truths to us. Relationships and especially marriages can build up what I call "relational plaque" over time. Usually, the little neglects and sometimes large events couples experience over the years that are poorly managed create the plaque within relationships.

Many Christians today have a problem with the word "sin." Instead, we want to call sin a family of origin issue or a personality trait. Selfishness, rudeness, taking advantage of each other and lying are all sin. Sin begins to trickle into a marriage and if not owned or identified by the person sinning, he or she can create distance within the relationship.

This buildup of sin or plaque is not always very obvious and continues to multiply if repentance and forgiveness are not present within the relationship. When I am counseling with a new couple in my office, I often ask them the standard question, "So what brings you here today?"

Sometimes the couples will look at me, then look at each other and shrug their shoulders. Inevitably one of them will say something to the affect that "we're just not getting along." The following couple's story is a case in point:

Nancy and Kevin are a clean-cut looking couple with an upper middle-class income and strong Christian beliefs and practices. They were married young and had children shortly thereafter.

Both now in their mid-30s, Kevin has many challenges in his career, Nancy has a part-time business and they have three teenagers. They began to feel that they didn't like each other very much anymore. They really couldn't point to a turning event in their marriage that caused this dislike; there just seemed to be a wall between them. They couldn't seem to connect and were just going through the motions of work, school and PTA along with their children's activities.

"We love each other," they both said, but we just don't know how to get our marriage back on track where we like each other." In allowing Nancy and Kevin to continue to talk about their day-in and day-out activities, it was obvious that not only had some of the structure of a healthy marriage disappeared but there seemed to be no awareness of what each person's chores or behaviors were.

I asked Kevin and Nancy when the last time was that they asked for forgiveness for sinning against the other. I wish you could have seen their faces drop! From their mutual expressions, I could tell what they were thinking, "What do you mean by sinning against each other? We're Christians!"

Sometimes reality is overwhelming for Christian couples especially when they have been lulled into a state of unawareness of their sins. Teaching Nancy and Kevin that some of their behaviors and attitudes were sin and that sin had to be confessed, dealt with and forgiven was like turning on a light bulb . This was a great couple who really did love each other but they drifted away from the basic truth that they still sinned.

I know many of you reading this book may think a lot like

Kevin and Nancy. "Nobody sins around here." I challenge you to think of the last time you asked for forgiveness of a sin you committed (willfully or not) against your spouse. If it's been more than days or weeks, you may be excusing your sin in your relationship with your spouse. I sin in my relationship with my precious Lisa, sometimes in rude, unthoughtful or selfish ways, but I have made a commitment in my heart that if I sin against anyone, it is my biblical duty to confess that sin to them. I am to accept the fact that till the day I die, I am a sin-afflicted, imperfect human being.

Yes, of course, as I grow in the Lord, I should sin much less. But I should still confess it when I do.

In a healthy marriage, each person is going to be asking for forgiveness at least weekly. I in no way plan to sin (at least most times) but if I do, I know I have to go to my wife and say, "Lisa, I sinned against you by being selfish. Will you forgive me?" Then she usually says, "I forgive you." That doesn't mean I have permission to keep on sinning; it just means I must be honest when I do.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Now you're probably asking yourself what does both plaque and sin have to do with each other? Couples who don't own sin for what sin really is will, over time, develop relational plaque. It can take years. A husband and wife eventually will both be aware of the fact that they are not as close as they once were, and this is because of unconfessed sin. They are no longer as honest as they once were either. Quietly they keep score of things that they never talk about. Entitlements begin to grow along with other kinds of symptomatic behaviors because of unconfessed sin.

Let's discuss a little further how this happens in a

relationship context. Suppose a husband and wife go out for a social event. During the evening out, the husband makes a few sarcastic remarks and put-downs directed toward his wife. In most cases, his wife will just suck it up and may not even mention the hurt he caused her (plaque begins). If she does bring it up, he may belittle the pain and rationalize it by saying, "I didn't mean anything by it." Hence, he is not owning his sin or the affect it had on the person he loves the most (more plaque builds up). You can see in this little incident how it can be very easy for plaque to increase.

For plaque not to build up in a relationship, we need to be honest about it being wrong. Saying, "I'm sorry" isn't quite the same as saying, "I sinned against you by putting you down." When you say, "I'm sorry," often the spouse is thinking, "You're sorry, all right." When couples can incorporate asking for the forgiveness of sin to each other, they are on their way to a plaque free relationship.

You may need to practice asking for forgiveness of each other so the behavior becomes a regular habit. Take your most common three sins against your spouse, write them down and practice saying to your wife or husband, "I have sinned against you by ... Can you forgive me?" If both of you practice doing this daily for a week, you should feel comfortable with the language and the process of forgiving each other and can begin putting it to regular use.

This behavior performed on a regular basis can keep your present plaque buildup down to a minimum so you can experience that fresh taste of honesty and integrity in your relationship. It can also facilitate more intimacy because there is no sin separating you from the holy of holies with each other. Use this practice to clean out the plaque buildup in your marriage and daily wash it clean. {eoa}

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