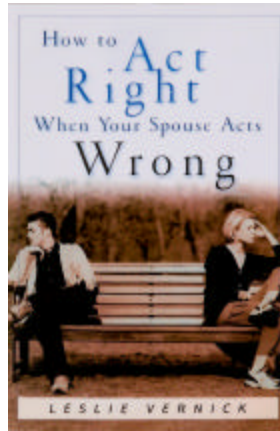


# Acting Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong

By Leslie Vernick



It was one of those crazy weeks, deadlines looming, clients in crisis, dirty dishes scattered throughout the house. In a moment of frustration, I yelled at my husband, “You *never* help me around the house!”

That was not accurate. Although Howard doesn’t always notice the things I do, he is always willing to help. I’m sure he was tempted to defend himself. “What do you mean I never help you around the house? Just last week I ....”

But that’s not what he did. Instead, he asked, “What can I do?”

Still frazzled, I snapped back, “Plan next week’s menu, shop for all the groceries and cook all the dinners.” And— he did. The meals were simple (frozen pizza, hot dogs, chicken nuggets, etc) but the love behind it was extravagant.

It is an incredible gift to our husband or wives when we respond in a godly way to their wrong actions. This gift comes through hard work? and the grace of God. God uses our relationships to school us in how to love when we don’t feel

like it, how to forgive when we've been sinned against, and how to overcome evil with good. God can use the imperfections, weaknesses, differences? and, yes, even the sins? of our spouses to help us become more like Christ. Marriage provides the perfect backdrop for continual lessons in applied theology.

## **It's My Problem?**

Someone once said, "Adversity introduces a person to himself". When our spouses aren't behaving like we'd like, God often wants to show us a few things about ourselves.

Before marriage, I pictured myself as a kind and easy-going person. Once married however, I began to get a glimpse of another side of me. I saw how much I liked my own way and how angry I got when I didn't get it. I noticed a tendency to hang on to my hurts. I got a peek at my pride when I believed I was right, and my husband was equally convinced I was wrong. These negative aspects of my personality were exposed when Howard wasn't doing what I thought he should do. When things were pleasant between us, these sins remained hidden.

I often see the same pattern as I counsel married couples. When I ask, "When did your problems start?" I often hear, "I didn't realize I *had* problems until I got married."

Rather than focus on what our spouses are doing *to* us that is annoying or hurtful, we must redirect our attention to what our spouse's wrong reveal *in* us.

We generally blame our spouses for our reactions: “You make me so mad.” “If you didn’t do that, I wouldn’t act this way.” But our spouses don’t *cause* our responses. For example, I feel impatient and irritated when I am waiting in line for a slow clerk who is chatting with another clerk. The clerk is not *making* me feel these feelings. She is simply the trigger that exposes the impatience and anger that is already in my heart.

Jesus explains it this way.

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. Luke 6:45

What overflows from your heart and comes up and out of your mouth when your spouse behaves badly? God uses those moments to expose our hearts so that we can see ourselves more clearly, change and grow. Part of that change is learning to step back and take in the larger picture.

### **The Real Battle**

When I’m fighting with my husband, I usually lose sight of whom I *should* be fighting and what I should be fighting *for*. I fight to get my way, to be right, or to prove my point. But the real struggle couples face is not for such temporal victories. As much as we might feel it in the moment, our spouses are not the enemy. Rather than engage in combat with each other, we need to ward off Satan’s tactics. Rather than seeking to vindicate ourselves, we need to fight for

the glory of God, the preservation of our marriages, our spiritual health and our children's future.

Satan is our real enemy. He is out to destroy us (1Peter 5:8). Satan tries to convince us that God and His ways don't satisfy and believing and that following Him will rob us of something enjoyable. During times of marital troubles he whispers, "Why should you work on your marriage? After all, look what your spouse has done. Why should you forgive: You have needs too."

When Susan discovered that her husband, John, was heavily involved in internet pornography, she felt deep hurt and anger. Her first impulse was to shame him publicly, exposing him to his family, church, and employer. But if Susan is going to win her battle, she needs a clear understanding of Satan's strategies and the weapons available to her.

The only weapons that have any real power are spiritual (2 Corinthians 10:4). God gives us a powerful alternative to reacting recklessly to our spouses' sin: "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). The Apostle Peter reminds us, "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1Peter 2:15). We overcome evil with good when we stop battling our spouses and respond to wrongdoing in ways that are godly, righteous, and loving.

### **From Reacting to Responding**

Jennifer came to counseling grinning from ear to ear. "I finally get it," she said. When I don't react to Paul's stupid remarks with a sarcastic dig, God

actually works in his heart.” Jennifer had learned an important lesson. Though we don’t intentionally set out to ruin our marriages or hurt our mates, our reactions to our spouses’ wrongs can be like tossing a lit match into gasoline. A relationship deteriorates rapidly when two sinners sin against each other at the same time.

To reverse this pattern, we need to learn how to stop reacting out of our fleshly nature and bad habits and start responding as God calls us to do. Most often this process starts by harnessing our tongues. Proverbs tells us “Reckless words pierce like a sword” (Proverbs 12:18). The psalmist knew about struggling with the tongue. “I said, ‘I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence’” (Psalm 39:1). Yet, he also knew that keeping quiet can be tough. “But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased” (v.2).

Something in us feels good when we open our mouths and let someone have it.

In our culture, we have been encouraged to express our negative feelings so that we don’t become unhealthy. But negative feelings are a lot like vomit. It feels better to get it out, but vomit belongs in the toilet? not on your spouse.

Writing letters to my husband? the kind I rip up rather than send? helps rid me of destructive emotions. Ask God for His perspective. He will then teach you what to do with your negative reactions so that you can address why you’re upset in a constructive manner. Inevitably, God-directed responses will demonstrate His love.

## Costly Choices

Many couples are committed to staying married “no matter what” but do so with hard hearts. God doesn’t command us simply to stay married, however. He commands us to *love*, no matter how that person is behaving. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27).

Love, from God’s perspective, is much deeper than an emotional feeling for another person. And it is bigger than a commitment to stay together no matter what. To love my husband or wife as God calls me to means that I must consciously choose to act in his best interests, even when it costs me. This type of love is demonstrated when a tired husband stays up late talking with a wife who needs a listening ear, or when a wife who hates to cook gladly makes her husband’s favorite meal. But what does godly love look like when our spouse hurts us, disappoints us or sins against us?

David knew his wife, Lisa, wasn’t honest with him about their finances. But he never confronted her about it. He said he loved her and didn’t want to upset her or make her mad.

However, genuine love is defined by actions that focus on another person’s good, not actions that simply make another person *feel* good. “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted” (Proverbs 27:5-6).

What was in Lisa's best interests? She didn't need David to continue to overlook her spending and deceit; she desperately needed him to lovingly confront her. Lisa's "wrong" became part of God's plan to mature David. God wanted him to become a God-centered husband, not a Lisa-centered husband. David learned to wrap himself in God's all-sufficient love and received strength to move beyond his fear of rejection. Then he could boldly love Lisa by confronting the spending problem—for her good, and for the welfare of their marriage and family.

### **The Gifts of Love**

Loving our spouse when we are angry or in pain is difficult. It may even feel impossible. But the love that gives good gifts to undeserving people does not originate in a human heart; it is God's love displayed through us. When our spouses acts wrong, we may not readily be able to give them our affection, warmth, or companionship. However, there are gifts of love we can give, regardless of the current climate of our marriages.

**The gift of acceptance.** Sometimes we refuse to accept our spouses for who they are and where they are. We seem surprised when our spouses act imperfectly or differently, as if somehow they're never supposed to do such things. "I can't believe you did that," we say. "How could you think like that?"

I've heard people say over and over again in counseling, "You're not the person I married!" One time, a husband replied, "Oh yes I am. But the person you date? He was a fake."

Learning to accept our spouses doesn't mean we like their faults, neither does it imply that we resign ourselves to a hopeless situation. True acceptance begins with understanding reality; we? and our spouses are creatures in process.

Acceptance is more than a grudging acknowledgment of reality. Acceptance is a true gift when we stop resenting having to give it, when we learn to be emotionally content with our spouses as they are, all the while asking God to mature them.

**The gift of truth.** We do not always face the truth in our marriages. We imagine the best in spite of evidence to the contrary. We close our eyes to information that would help us make better decisions. However, there are times when we must tell the truth about reality, though always with love (1 Corinthians 13:1,Ephesians 4:15).

None of us likes it when our spouses tell us something about our behavior or our attitude that we don't want to face. Yet, it is loving and good when they do so. Why? So we do not continue to deceive ourselves into thinking that all is well when we are about to fall off a cliff (James 5:19-20).

At times your efforts to give the gift of truth to your spouse will have wonderful results. Other times you may see no change or repentance. Perhaps you will even be mocked. Remember, God has called us to love our spouses as no one else in this world will. That may mean suffering under mockery and still speaking truth (See Ezekiel 2).



**The gift of kindness.** Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and being kind is one of the definitions of love (1 Corinthians 13:4). Yet, as with the other gifts, we struggle to give the gift of kindness when we don't feel like it or when our mates have hurt us.

Joan's husband, Adam, was an alcoholic and a drug abuser. His drug use was so out of control that Joan finally asked him to move out until he got help. When, through friends, she heard he had a bad case of the flu, she cooked a pot of soup and delivered it to his apartment. Joan gave the gift of kindness to her selfish and irresponsible husband.

Being kind and gracious doesn't mean you ignore the wrongdoing or pretend it didn't happen. Being kind means that whatever happens to you doesn't define you. It doesn't shape you or turn you into something evil. Extending kindness and mercy doesn't depend upon whether the other person has been good or bad, wrong or right. Kindness is a gift of love, not a reward for good behavior.

In every marriage there are moments, even seasons, where we have the opportunity to choose to act right when our spouses acts wrong. It might be in small, everyday ways (cooking hot dogs for dinner) or in big ways (extending forgiveness in the face of deep betrayal). God will use even the pain of a difficult marriage to help us become more like Christ? which He promises is very, very good.

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