

Reflection - A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage

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MFT 509: Pre-Marital Counseling

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January 31, 2023

Reflection: A Lasting Promise

This reflection is based on the book “A lasting Promise: The Christian guide to Fighting for your marriage by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, & Milt Bryan. Overall, I found this book to be impactful and inclusive of several tools that can help couples build strong marriages. The five points that resonated most with me were 1: the “crazy ladder”, 2: the “three key principals”, 3: “when one partner chooses a new strategy”, 4: “the problem with filters” and 5: the concept of “Amy and Flo.”

In the chapter on communication dangers the authors describe conflict escalation as “the crazy ladder” in which the conversation goes back and forth becoming increasingly negative driving up anger and frustration (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 17). This point was meaningful to me because, like so many other couples, I’ve found myself climbing this ladder in the past. As I read through some of the examples, I cringed having remembered similar conversations. One profound piece of this analogy was how ladders become less stable and more dangerous the higher up you get. The other piece is that we must make a choice to stop climbing that ladder. The authors note that it’s usually when one partner says something to deescalate the argument that causes the escalation to be “short circuited”. They also note that the step required for this is as simple as humbly softening your tone and putting down your shield. (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 21). Although I love the thought of taking on this posture of humility to diffuse an argument, in the past, I’ve been guilty of being “tired” of being the “humble one” in my marriage. This frustration can lead to a doubling down on conflict, where a person like myself may find themselves too stubborn to de-escalate first. Usually resulting in someone shutting down or leaving the room.

In the book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, John Gottman calls the de-escalation a “repair attempt”. He states that repair attempts “save marriages not just because they

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decrease emotional tension between spouses, but because by lowering the stress level, they also prevent your heart from racing and making you feel flooded [emotionally overwhelmed]” (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 66). This idea presents a practical justification for the repair attempt. In the future, when I’m working with unbelieving clients (who don’t share Christian values for humility), or with someone like myself who was frustrated and “tired” of being the “humble one” (i.e. the one to attempt repair) the practical justification to avoid emotional overwhelm should prove to be a very effective strategy.

Another great takeaway from A Lasting Promise is the simple 3 key principals it offers. The first of these keys being to “decide not slide.” This principal demonstrates that in marriage, we need to be intentional about what we say and do. Our unwillingness to decide an action causes a decision to be made for us or a “slide” to happen. If we’re not intentional about our communication, we can slide up the crazy ladder and into a place of disconnectedness, and contempt. The next key they give us is to “do your part.” I relate this to the scripture that says “Do to others as you would like them to do to you” (NLT Bible, Luke 6:31). In marriage, we often get so caught up in our partner’s wrongs that we forget there is nothing we can do to change them. When we’re intentional to “do our part” by treating our spouse as we would like to be treated, we become empowered to change the only thing that we can, ourselves. This also helps to disarm our partner. It softens their hearts to us so that we can practice communicating more effectively. The last key is to “make it safe to connect.” This concept really stood out for me. I knew that feeling safe in marriage leads to greater intimacy, because we can feel comfortable being vulnerable with each other. It never dawned on me however, that “making it safe to connect” should also mean agreeing not to fight or discuss hot topics during the time you set aside as “fun time”. I’ve had so many date nights, weekend trips and even my own

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honeymoon ruined because I failed to understand this concept. Instead, I thought that date night was the “perfect time” to bring up that issue we had been disagreeing about. In my mind, it was our time away from the kids so we could discuss the issue uninterrupted. I realize now that what I failed to do was to prioritize the fun in our relationship. I can also clearly see the difference between then and the date nights we have now. Somehow, on my own, I figured out how *not* to bring those things up on date nights or vacations but I’m thankful to have a clear reasoning to give future clients for it now.

The catalyst behind me choosing the MFT program was that 10 years ago my own marriage almost failed. We were separated for nine months and had a little over a year of very intense fighting and discord. For this reason, the author’s point about what to do when only one of you is pursuing a new strategy resonated with me deeply. At one time, I was in the same place. Back then, I was the only one interested in saving my marriage and I have since sat with many women dealing with the same issue. I realized that even if your husband doesn’t want to read the books, participate in the small group, or go to therapy, there are still things you can do improve your marriage. We aren’t able to change our husbands but we can certainly change ourselves.

The section “the problem with filters.” also resonated with me because while I knew that there can easily be a breakdown in communication, (I say apple, he hears orange), I didn’t know the reason for that breakdown. The authors use the analogy of a filter to illustrate the point. They say

Filters change what goes through them. A furnace filter takes dust out of the air. A camera filter alters the properties of light passing through it. A coffee filter lets the flavor through and leaves the grounds behind. In the same way, what goes through our “communication filters” is different from what comes out. (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 70).

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This analogy made it so clear how our inattention, mood or emotional state, or beliefs and expectations can completely change the meaning from what was said to what we heard. Even in the example given of the couple deciding what to do for fun, the couple didn't fight, but what they truly wanted went unmet because of the "mind reading" and filters they were hearing each other through. This concept really challenged me. I often tend to listen with filters. I don't mean to do it, and it comes from my gift of being able to intuitively understand (via body language, context clues etc.) what's not being said. The problem is that what can sometimes be a gift (many people have thanked me for being able to "pick up" on cues they missed) can also be a deterrent. The next time I find myself reacting vs. responding to something my husband has said, I'll be sure to stop and try to identify what filter I'm using to interpret what he's saying.

The last point that really resonated with me was the concept of Amy Vs. Flo. This resonated because it was an easy-to-understand interpretation of the relationship between amygdala vs. pre-frontal lobe. I never thought of "Flo" (the frontal lobe of the brain) as being the "decider." I knew it was the rational part of the brain and that it is the part that usually in control. What I didn't realize is that Flo gets "tired" sometimes and Amy (the Amygdala) takes over.

When your decider has been working steadily, your slider is going to want to cut it some slack...but the warning in these findings lies more in how hard it can be to stick to something you have decided is important when you are worn down by something else. Those are also times when it is easiest to give into temptations. (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 116)

The concept of your "slider" (Amy) cutting your "decider" (Flo) some slack resonated because I can see how so many bad decisions I've made in my personal and professional life have come from being "tired". Such as me being "tired" of being "humble" with my husband and sliding higher up the conflict ladder. It also resonated because I didn't realize that the stress I fail to manage, can manifest itself as Amy in the driver's seat of my brain. Stress management has

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never been a priority for me. In fact, I've considered it a "luxury" for many years. It wasn't until I read *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Pete Scazzero that I realized that the command to keep the Sabbath is God's invitation to help us manage our stress. He writes "I'm convinced that nothing less than an understanding of Sabbath as a *command* from God, as well as an incredible invitation, will enable us to grab hold of this rope God offers us" (Scazzero, 2006, p. 163). The rope he refers to is the rope "God is offering to us to keep from getting lost" in the "storms and trials of life" (Scazzero, 2006, p. 154). This means that on the days when I'm so busy "doing" that I neglect to give my mind and body time to rest, I'm effectively rejecting the rope God has offered me and have allowed Amy to hijack my thoughts and actions. The illustration of Amy and Flo have been a welcome reminder of the command to keep the Sabbath. This illustration has given me a renewed conviction that I haven't felt in over ten years. The Sabbath is God's gift to us and we shouldn't treat it with contempt.

Overall, these are just a few of the many concepts within the book *A Lasting Promise* that have helped deepen my understanding of practices I've been working on for years in my own marriage. As a Christian, we can fall into the trap of giving pat oversimplified or "over spiritualized" answers. Having this deepened understanding however, can not only help me to create rich treatment plans for my clients in the future, but also enrich the marital experience in my own home.

References

Nonperiodicals

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