



2. Negotiating Couple Complaints

By James D. Craig, PhD, LMFT

The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Case Study

Joe and Nancy have been married for twenty-five years. They own a large ranch-style house in the country with peeling paint, broken shutters, and a junk car sitting on concrete blocks in the driveway.

Despite his fiery temper and strong opinions, everyone likes Joe. He is tall and lanky, the proverbial “long drink of water” with a boyish grin and dark brown hair that make him look significantly younger than he is. Joe is the kind of guy who will give you the shirt off his back. During snow storms, he patrols the roads in his four wheel drive pickup looking for motorists he can help. He has repaired the church’s aging furnace more than a dozen times, and he never sends a bill.

Joe’s wife Nancy is short and stocky. She is nearly 100 pounds overweight—a fact she tries to disguise by wearing inexpensive, loose-fitting sweat suits. Her graying hair and frumpy appearance make her look more like Joe’s mother than his wife. Nancy’s perpetual scowl adds years to her appearance as well.

Joe called the church and said he and his wife needed marriage counseling. Pastor Rich was away at a conference, so the secretary scheduled him with Dan, who she introduced as “one of the church’s lay counselors”. The couple arrived at the appointed time, and Dan invited them back to the newly remodeled Lay Counseling Office, hoping they would not discover this was his very first real counseling session.

After ten minutes of small talk, Dan gathered his courage and asked, “How can I help you?” Joe’s good-natured smile disappeared. “We’re here because she spends hours on long distance calls to her mother, and it’s costing me a fortune. I had to wear a dirty shirt to work yesterday because my wife can’t get off her duff and do the laundry!” Nancy angrily countered “Well, he spends over fifteen hours a week playing golf and working on his stupid ’65 Mustang! Everyone thinks he is a great family man, but I can tell you that the kids hardly recognize him when he comes home!”

The couple’s squabbling quickly escalated into a loud, profanity-laced fight. Bewildered, Dan turned to Nancy and pleaded anxiously, “You have to agree that cutting down on the long distance calls would save money. In fact, the Bible says...” She rolled her eyes and interrupted “Don’t you know anything? We get free nights and weekends. And it’s cheaper than going home.”

Dumbfounded by her response, Dan turned to Joe and asked “Well, will you agree to do a little less golfing and spend more time with the kids?” The tall man snapped back “I haven’t been golfing in a month. And I guess she isn’t going to tell you about the credit cards she has been running up to



the sky!” “You use those cards, too” she said quietly, beginning to weep and looking plaintively at Dan. He had no idea what to do, so he escaped the session by telling them “I have another appointment I have to get to, but if you will meet with me next week, I’ll try to have some answers for you.”

The couple never told Dan the whole story. When Nancy was eight months pregnant with their first child, Joe had an affair with Joanna, his best friend’s ex-wife. Nancy became suspicious when her credit card was declined at the grocery store. When she got home, she dug the itemized statements out of Joe’s disorganized, jam-packed filing cabinet. She was alarmed to see evidence of numerous cash advances as well as purchases from furniture, appliance, and lingerie stores located near her husband’s workplace.

When Joe got home that night—two hours after the shop closed—she threw the bill in his face and demanded to know what was going on. He smiled in a condescending way and claimed the credit card company had made a billing mistake. She accused him of having an affair with Joanna. Joe admitted he had been “helping someone”, though he refused to give any more information. “There’s nothing between us” he assured Nancy, “It’s just that this person has no money, and I couldn’t stand to see her starve. Now I don’t want to hear anymore about it. It is time to forgive and forget.”

The Problem

It is easy to think of marriage counseling as a negotiation between warring parties. Caregivers listen to competing complaints, struggle to find valid points on both sides, and suggest a reasonable win-win solution. They think getting both sides to make concessions will result in reconciliation and peace.

Apparently, troubled couples think the same way. Seldom do they come in to confess wrongs and explore ways to correct them. Rather, each spouse appears in the counseling office with a carefully rehearsed defense, a strategy designed to convince the counselor that the *other* person is the problem. Watch courtroom TV shows, and you will see a very similar dynamic. Initially, a couple counseling session is almost always about accusations and judgment, not cooperation and healing.

Negotiating usually backfires because it ignores underlying agendas and motives, many of which are dishonest and irrational. Troubled people are fighting hidden battles that have little to do with their reported conflicts. They lie to themselves, to each other, and to the counselor. They amplify trivial issues while remaining silent about those that are significant. This is particularly true of spouses who are covering up substance abuse, sexual infidelity, and other addictive behaviors. They come to the counseling session absolutely determined to say nothing about these matters, apparently trying to convince themselves that these have nothing to do with their marital problems. When these matters come to light, they either argue that the marriage was troubled *before* the addictive behavior began, or that the marriage problems caused the addictive behavior.



Negotiating unwittingly plays into a dysfunctional process in which troubled people make counselors their scapegoats. As bizarre as it sounds, embattled couples find unity in resisting and frustrating counselors. They can fight like crazy during the session and refuse every suggested solution, yet leave agreeing that it is the counselor's incompetence that prevents them from having a happy marriage. This is especially true of pastors, who as noted earlier, are often expected to come up with some sort of spiritual solution that works despite the thoroughgoing resistance of the clients.

The Solution

For Joe and Nancy, telephone bills, classic car, and credit card balances are not the problem. The nature of their relationship is. Joe has broken his vows. Though he won't admit it, he has been emotionally and sexually involved with Joanna. He has also intimidated Nancy into acting as if she believes the matter has been resolved. Nancy hates the pretense, but she fears discussing Joanna would end their marriage.

Both Joe and Nancy are profoundly lonely, suspicious, and disappointed in each other. They do not have a workable plan for repentance, forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation. They are wasting their lives bickering at a superficial level while avoiding the deeper issue that separates them.

Their approach to getting help is just as indirect as their approach to each other. On one hand, they want a counselor to fix their troubled relationship. On the other hand, they use the counseling session to cement their present relationship. By provoking Dan into a fruitless negotiation, they avoid change by demonstrating how his inadequacies and weaknesses prevent their healing.

Instead of negotiating, Dan needed to take a different approach. For example, he could have interrupted their argument by saying:

I've tried helping you negotiate tonight, but it just isn't working. Frankly, I'm completely lost. There must be much more to your pain and I won't be able to help unless you help me understand more about your relationship. I want you have the kind of marriage God wants for you. Would you agree to meet with me three times before I even try to suggest a solution? In the meantime, I would like your permission to discuss your case—minus names and other identifying details—with a professional counselor. I need help helping you.

This approach prevents runaway arguments. It suggests that the problem is the way the combatants avoid deeper issues, not the superficial issues they use to avoid and punish each other. It gives the counselor time to think, pray, and prepare. Above all, it reminds the couple that marriage is a holy covenant of intimacy and oneness, not a series of crass negotiations between self-centered equals.

Pastoral Teaching Tip

Both conservative and liberal pastors have led us to fear *legalism*—a horrible condition they believe results from placing too much emphasis on law and not enough on grace. Though firmly



entrenched in the contemporary church and sure to get a hearty “Amen” from just about any Christian crowd, this analysis is simply false.

Jesus frequently addressed the Scribes and Pharisees, but he never accused them of being too concerned about God’s Law. To the contrary, he condemned them for concocting ingenious, convoluted legal interpretations that *allowed them to break God’s Law with impunity*. In fact, the only people who really angered Jesus were those who cleverly masked their contempt for God’s Law by appearing to revere it!

For example, “an eye for an eye” is a righteous law, God’s Law. It means that if you back out of your parking place and knock out my headlight, you owe me a headlight. You don’t owe me a new car, a pound of flesh, or your firstborn child. This law provides a godly, fair way of settling damages in an orderly manner. More important, it preserves society by prohibiting feuding. Civilized people trade insurance information and go on their way, inconvenienced and a little irritated, yet confident that “an eye for an eye” is protecting both their interests.

Now suppose some wicked person wanted to get around this law while appearing to keep it. He would do what the Pharisees did, reinterpreting “an eye for an eye” as a law *requiring retribution*. Though the words remain the same, the meaning has been cleverly modified. Under this interpretation, when you back out and hit my car, *I am obligated to get back at you* for the damage you have done. Rather than seeking a new headlight, *I seek revenge*, and feel justified in venting my rage by taking a ball bat to your headlight. And as you see me approach your car with a ball bat, what do you do? Pull a knife? Go for your gun? Now we have the makings of a feud—the *very action “an eye for an eye” was given to prevent*.

This was the genius of the Pharisees. They tirelessly combed through God’s Law, spinning convoluted interpretations that allowed them to break the very laws they purported to keep.

Today’s theologians and pastors have turned the definition of legalism on its head, heaping condemnation upon obedient believers and justifying those who are disobedient—a modern twist on the ancient idea of continuing in sin that grace may abound! They have given rise to what I have called “The New Pharisees”—clever individuals whose outward Christian piety effectively cloaks their wicked thoughts, motives, and liaisons.

Consider the case example. Joe’s easy-going, always helpful, “forgive and forget” routine *appears* gracious, generous and giving. But behind the scenes, he is defensive, threatening, and morally compromised.

Legalism does not respect God’s Law. Legalism *twists* God’s Law, making it possible for men and women to break their covenants while appearing to keep them. This is the problem that bedevils the church today—apparently Christian individuals who have worked out clever ways to disobey God while appearing to be committed believers.