

## **THE FOUR DEADLY HORSEMEN THAT THREATEN MARITAL UNITY**

“A Biblical Path to Unity in Marriage” -- Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Perhaps the saddest news in life is not the news of death in a family or the presence of a terminal disease. One of the saddest reports is of the impending divorce of a couple we love. When I counsel husbands and wives, they sometimes have reached the point of no return. Outside of a miracle, they are bent on separation and divorce. How can this happen when just months or years before, they stood before witnesses vowing their intent to stay together “until death do us part?” John M. Gottman is a marital therapist, who has scientifically studied thousands of couples over a period of 35+ years, determining what makes marriages succeed or fail. Those who succeed he calls “masters of relationships” and those who fail he calls “disasters of relationships.” Dr. Gottman has discovered that 67% of all first marriages in America end in divorce over a 40 year period. He states that half of these divorces occur within the first seven years. He also states that for second marriages, the divorce rate is 10% higher than for first time marriages. Dr. Gottman describes 4 Deadly Horsemen that come into marriage and herald its doom. He states that if these horsemen are present in marriage, a couple usually is divorced within 5.6 years of their wedding day. These four horsemen are simple expressions of emotion, called criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt.

**In criticism, this first deadly horseman is present when one or both of the partners see only the faults in the other person's actions.** It fails to focus on the good. It picks the other person apart, and tears them down until it threatens the very core of who they are as a person. Dr. Gottman found that there should be five positive interactions in a relationship for every negative interaction. If we have something critical to say to our spouse, we should be sure that we have already sincerely and honestly complimented them in five other ways that day. All of us are prone to being critical, but we are even more prone to being badly hurt by criticism. I read a story lately. It is only a story, but it makes its point well. A father, son, and their donkey were traveling from one village to another. The boy walked while the man rode the donkey. The father overheard a bystander say, “That’s a shame. Look how that man is making that poor boy walk.” Not wanting to be the object of criticism, the father and son changed places. The boy rode the donkey while the man walked. He then heard a woman comment, “Look how that boy on the donkey is making that poor man walk.” The father and

son both climbed onto the donkey. As they traveled down the road, someone said, "Look how that man and boy are making that poor donkey suffer." They both got off and walked. The people remarked, "Look at that stupid man and boy. They're walking when they could be riding that donkey." When they entered the next village, the boy was walking and the man was carrying the donkey! No amount of changing to please critical people, even our spouses, will end the criticism. Kent Crockett, in his book, *"I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint,"* wrote on page 113, "As compassion decreases, criticism increases. As compassion increases, criticism decreases."

Criticism is seldom helpful. Continually trying to change to meet the demands of a critical partner in marriage is endless. A man and his wife once pulled into a gas station to refuel their car. As the tank was being refilled, the station attendant washed the windshield. When he finished, the driver of the car said, "The windshield is still dirty. Wash it again." "Yes, sir," the attendant answered. As he scrubbed the windshield a second time, he looked closely for any bugs or dirt he might have missed. When he finished, the man in the car became angry. "It's still dirty!" He yelled. Don't you know how to wash a windshield? Do it again!" The attendant cleaned the windshield a third time, carefully looking for any place he might have missed, but could find no messy spots anywhere. By now, the driver was fuming. He screamed, "This windshield is still filthy! I'm going to talk to your boss to make sure you don't work here another day. You are the lousiest windshield washer I have ever seen!" As he was about to get out of the car, his wife reached over and removed his glasses. She carefully wiped them with a tissue, then put them back on his face. The driver slumped embarrassingly down in his seat as he observed a spotless windshield. Critical people view others through their own dirty glasses. The dirt on our own hearts causes us to see everything from an unclean, critical perspective. We become angry at what we perceive to be dirt on other people, when in reality we are looking at others through the dirt on our own hearts.

Let's examine the Word of God regarding this first deadly horseman that threatens all our marriages. Jesus said in Matthew 7: 1, 2, "Do not judge lest you be judged; For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you." James 2: 13 is strong. "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." I Peter 2: 1-3 gives the antidote to a critical spirit of judgment, which is a deep longing for the sincere milk of the word, which leads us to put aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and

slander. Paul's injunction in Philippians 4: 8 ought to check our spirit of criticism, which is our tendency to quickly speak the first thoughts that come to our mind in a crisis. I read, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Perhaps the greatest check I have in my speech is found in James 1: 19, 20, "This you know, my beloved brethren: But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." It is often our own frustrations with how life is going for us that lead us to develop a critical attitude. If life is not turning out the way we desire, we are prone to hide our own frustrations by finding fault with others. Regardless of how "good" we think we are, please remember, "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment" (Isaiah 64:6) It's easy to be critical. The faults of others are often very obvious to us. During these times, we must make sure we give grace instead. Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt. 10:8).

**The second horseman is defensiveness.** It keeps our partner at arms length. A defensive person often or always finds an excuse for mistakes, instead of admitting faults and reconciling differences. Defensiveness is actually a kind of attack, as the defender does not trust his or her spouse. Defensiveness reveals a stubbornness and rebellion in our own hearts. We want to be right all the time and we forget that our deep desire to defensively prove our rightness is the charge of our own wrong spirit. Without mutual confession in marriage, the marriage lives in a dark cavern in this aspect of intimacy. A critical spirit puts marriage on the edge of a precipice, waiting to plunge below. The deep cavern of defensiveness is a darkness caused by failure to confess sin. James 5: 16 teaches us, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

Did you read "Our Daily Bread" for July 8, 2011? David H. Roper wrote, "Marriage is hard at best; disagreements and difficult adjustments abound. While no one must live in an abusive and dangerous relationship, accepting the difficulties of poverty, hardship, and disappointment can lead to happiness. A marriage vow is a binding obligation to love, honor, and cherish one another for as long as we shall live because Jesus has asked us to do so. As a friend of mine once put it, "This is the vow that keeps us faithful even when we don't feel like keeping our vows." Squabbles and strife in marriage are inevitable at times. God commands that we act quickly when

such problems occur. Matthew 5: 23-25 doesn't teach us to become defensive and silent or defensive and retaliating. Rather, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends *quickly* with your opponent..."

**The third horseman is stonewalling.** To stonewall is to refuse to talk or listen to your partner on a certain forbidden subject, determined by one partner. Usually we stonewall because of fear, fear of the consequences of discussing a topic or moving in that direction. It includes changing the subject or maintaining a stony silence, if the forbidden subject comes up. It often includes a seething anger whenever a certain topic is brought up. It is a simple refusal to discuss something or open up emotionally. It gives a personal series of excuses for entering a forbidden discussion. It always shows great disrespect to one's partner. Stonewalling lets the underlying conflict grow. It solves nothing. It only creates hard feelings that damage relationships. It's much better to listen and transparently discuss whatever subject comes up in a relationship in a respectful manner. Avoiding an issue or a discussion or a person for too long just makes matters worse and worse. It is better to talk through something difficult than to have a dark cloud hanging over our relationship.

For instance, ladies, your husband spends all weekend watching sports instead of participating in family activities. You sit with him, explain to him that you don't have a problem with him watching sports, but would like for him to take a few hours of his weekend to spend with the family. He responds by folding his arms and muttering, "Whatever." Then he is back to watching the game. He is totally disconnected from the family and what the family needs from him. That's stonewalling. Or, men, your wife has done something that hurts your feelings or, there is a problem in the marriage that you wish to discuss with her. Your attempts to communicate your feelings with her over the situation are met with stony silence. Her way of avoiding conflict is to refuse to participate in conversation with you. That's stonewalling. The scriptures are clear in Ephesians 5:33, "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Love and respect are "primary needs" for women and men... respectively... women need love and men need respect like they need air to breathe. Stonewalling is a major lack of love when husbands do it to their wives. It is a major lack of respect when wives stonewall their husbands.

Other forms of stonewalling are changing the subject during an important conversation, withholding intimacy, and the worst form of contempt is using silence and withholding conversation to gain or maintain the upper hand or to gain or keep control in marriage.

**The fourth horseman is contempt, which may be the deadliest horseman of all. It is a total lack of respect.** It is communicated through obvious things like slandering our spouse in front of other people. It may arise through something as subtle as an eye-roll when our spouse states an opinion or makes a comment we don't like. If we would not treat our friend or our pet or even a stranger with contempt, doesn't our spouse deserve better? Dr. Gottman states that "masters of relationships" speak gently with one another, while "disasters of relationships" point their finger at their partner. They diagnose their partner's personality defects, hoping to be appreciated for it.

The Word of God is clear in Colossians 3: 18, 19, saying, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them." Paul adds in Ephesians 5: 22, 25, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." Wives, do you speak to your husband the way you speak to the Lord? Husbands, do you treat your wife the way Jesus laid down His life for the church. I charge us all--treat your spouse as the most special and important person in your life. Tell your spouse often, first by your actions and then, by your words, how important they are to you. Reassure them often. Treat your spouse tenderly, the same way as when you were courting them. Demonstrate your love and respect to each other.

Couldn't we all use a fresh inside look at ourselves, to find out if even one of the four horsemen has invaded our marriages? **It's never too late to change if we are willing to admit our own faults and to seek God's help to change.** Perhaps there's time to talk it over at home--and to ask each other, as well as ourselves, if one of the four horsemen has invaded our marital castle of joy. Confession, repentance, and God's help stand ready to heal us today from remaining intimate enemies. "To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit the blessing." (I Peter 3: 8, 9.)