

Principle 2 : The husband and wife relationship is our children's first communication model - cont'd.

"Irreconcilable differences" is an often cited reason for failed marriages, resulting usually from communication problems. Regretfully, divorces result simply from this two words and nothing else. May we suggest differing expectations and our inability to control our tongue as possible root causes. Let's take a lazy teenager in the house with a home-maker mother who does everything for the family. She is a wonderfully patient, capable and loving mother who does not expect praises or help from the teenager, does not think anything of the sacrifices she makes and can also take criticisms for spoiling the child. The child may grow up to be a less responsible person but during the growing up years, there would be peace. On the other hand, if the mother is one who expects help from the teenager but got none and keeps criticizing her child who retaliates with rude words, conflicts will rule the day. Yet we cannot be without expectations (only the dead are without expectations). So adjustments of expectations are necessary, especially towards our spouses. Wise sayings warns us about our tongue, "But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." (James 3:8). Remedies are hidden here, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise." (Prov 10:19) and "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger." (Prov 15:1).

These expectations in marriages are common sources of conflicts: wives expect their husbands to be more helpful around the house or with the children or at least not take them for granted, and able to receive gentle love from their husbands. Husbands expect their wives to be more submissive or to give them more respect especially in front of the children or with guests. The disputes centre around who is more deserving or entitled to be loved first. Simply put: "My wife does not deserve my love because she does not respect me" or "My husband does not deserve my respect because he does not love me". Sounds familiar? This creates a stalemate with each waiting for the other to move first. Neither sides' expectations are met because both sides refuse to take the first step (or may have been doing the right thing but stop because we got tired of being taken for granted). Next, we allow our tongue to demean the other person. Very soon poisonous words from the untamed tongue are unleashed with our growing children learning or even spills over to them and teenage tensions may emerge.

In earlier issues, a daily time where couples chat about the day was suggested and we gave a few topics for such discussions too. If conversations, resolving issues are often done in non-conflict moments, then when arguments arise, both parties would be better able to have some form of peaceful, reasonable dialogue to arrive at something acceptable. This "chat" habit is helpful for developing conflict resolution.

Some may ask, what if it still fails after trying everything (regular time together is impossible because of the schedule or inability to chat), does that mean divorce is acceptable? Consider this: with expectations not being met in one marriage, will bringing them into a second marriage help? We have to reflect on our own mistakes first. Cases of second marriage working out are because of grace and should not be taken as examples of success. Working out the issues through changes in expectations or self-changes is the way to go. In the Bible, divorce was granted not as a way out but because we wanted it – "He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so." (Matt 19:8).

Women want tender love, men want respect but neither will get it when both keep claiming rights. Both will always be caught in a vicious cycle of waiting for the other person to start or simply give up suffering. Yet, patience and long suffering are fruits of the spirit! Perhaps, the thought of losing our spouse the next day may change our perspective of how we should treat them today and be more forgiving.

Another communication area worth mentioning is listening skills. If a good friend experiencing hardship calls us, we may ask, "What happened? Tell me more." This sets the stage for the process venting process and listening. When our spouse comes to us with some issues, we tend to respond with a suggestion to solve a problem when what is needed may be a listening ear. There may not need to have a solution nor is the spouse expecting one. We do take our spouses for granted after a while and treat outsiders better. Familiarity does breed contempt.

Communication is not only about talking. It is about listening, our tone of voice, attitude and attentiveness. Adjusting our expectations will influence all these and affect communication. When our expectations rule, it is only a monologue, we insist things to be our own way, and communication cease to exist.

Christmas is coming. Instead of buying a gift, take a stroll with our spouse and just chat. Chat about how we can improve our levels of communication within the marriage or how to grow deeper in our understanding of each other. More importantly, let's set a good communication example for our children and let the new year have a new beginning.