

Pastor's Corner – 8-25-2018
Making Marriage Work – Overcoming Gridlock

I'm writing this Pastor's Corner as I'm sitting in the Bismarck airport waiting for my flight to Dallas/Fort Worth. While I generally like heading back to Texas there is one part of the trip that I'm not so thrilled about – Metroplex traffic. Anyone who has lived in a major metro area knows what I'm talking about. We're so fortunate here in Bismarck where we rarely encounter any kind of significant traffic delays. In the DFW Metroplex, traffic is always bad, but especially during rush hour when it's not uncommon to have straight up gridlock.

Gridlock, of course, is when you're driving along on the interstate and end up coming to a complete stop behind miles and miles of cars. Perhaps there was an accident up ahead. Perhaps there's road construction. Perhaps there're just too many people on the road at one time. Whatever the reason, gridlock is awful and there's nothing you can do about it. You're just stuck.

Marriages can encounter a form of gridlock as well. It happens when an issue goes unresolved and the two of you keep coming back around to have the same fights (let's call them discussions) over and over again. In some cases, marital gridlock can last for years, and if it goes unchecked a painful separation may very well be on its way. There is a way to overcome gridlock, however. It's not quick, nor easy, but it is possible. If you find yourself gridlocked with your spouse over an issue here are some things you can try.

First, recognize that gridlocked problems almost always stem from some kind of unmet dream. When one partner has unmet hopes, aspirations, wishes or dreams that are in conflict with those of their spouse then gridlock is quite common. And because the source of gridlock is found in personal identity and core beliefs it is unlikely that the underlying issues will ever go away. In other words, you might not ever solve the fundamental issues causing gridlock, but you can learn to live with them.

So what does this look like in the real world? Well for my wife and I, we have a different way of approaching money. We have figured out how to make it work, but it wasn't always that way. I tend to be a saver and she tends to be a spender. But the issue is deeper than just spending habits. The way each of us relates to money is connected with some pretty deep values and dreams.

For me, saving money and being frugal is a priority because I grew up in a family that was always stressed by not having enough. We always had junker cars, cheap clothes, and rental houses (sometimes in sketch neighborhoods). My parents did a good job with what they had but I knew that money was always tight. In my world, saving money and being frugal is a way to provide financial security for my family.

Amy's experience was quite different. Her family wasn't overly wealthy but they were comfortable enough. If there were financial challenges, Amy didn't know about it. So she didn't grow up with the same kind of baggage that I did. She would prefer to spend the money and enjoy it rather than stuff it in a mattress for a rainy day.

Since we have such different ways of relating to money it would be easy for us to get stuck in gridlock. If I insisted on saving every penny and she insisted on spending as quick as quickly as we earned you can bet there would be fights. Fortunately, we have worked this out over the years and this potential gridlock is just something we live with. The point here is that

gridlocked problems are rooted in dreams, hopes, and personal identity. The first step then is to try to identify the unmet dreams that our behind your position.

Once you understand the dreams behind the gridlock, the second step is to start to through it with your spouse. You can do this by sitting down with pen and paper and writing a few things down. Write down an explanation of your position. Don't criticize or complain about your spouse (or their position), just outline your perspective. Next, write the story of the hidden dreams that underlie your position. Explain where they come from and why they are important to you. Once these are written down, take some time to share your thoughts with your spouse. Take turns speaking and listening. The goal here is dialogue rather than finding an immediate solution.

Once you begin sharing your position the third step to overcoming gridlock is to sooth each other. These kinds of discussions can get heated pretty quickly. It's good to be aware of that going in. If you start to sense temperatures rising, then it's time to cool off. Remember, nothing beneficial ever happens when one or both parties are flooded and stressed.

The fourth step is to end the gridlock. You do this by identifying areas where you can compromise and areas where you have to remain firm. One way to make this distinction is to draw two circles on a piece of paper. In one circle you will list all the non-negotiables, these are things that you simply cannot budge on. In the other circle you would list those things that you would be willing to compromise on. The goal here is to try to keep the first circle as small as possible and fit the rest into the category of compromise.

Once you have an idea of where you overlap with your spouse in the realm of compromise it's time to try it out. Work out a plan that respects the core beliefs and dreams of both parties but also includes compromise between the two of you. Try it out for a couple of months then touch base on the issue to see if it's working. Overcoming gridlock is a process and it can take time and the occasional refresh.

Finally, say thank you. When you observe your spouse making changes or compromising make sure you let them know that you appreciate their efforts.

Ok, that's it for this week. The flight attendant just told us to stow our gear. Have a Happy Sabbath!

Pastor Tyler