

8 Things That Destroyed Our Marriage

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How does a husband of 10 years, a father of 3 awesome boys and a pastor of a young and growing church choose to walk in one Sunday afternoon and tell his wife he wants to end it all? How do you get there? What are the ingredients to a marriage that hits rock bottom like that?

#1- We rarely prayed together, and the way we prayed for each other was selfish.

Trisha and I are leading a church, helping people find their way back to God, praying for people after the service, praying for people in our small group, praying for marriages of people we are counseling...and yet there was a barrier in our marriage when it came to praying for each other. It is totally embarrassing...but we just didn't do it. When I did pray for Trisha I would pray in a selfish way that God would change her because she was driving me nuts or making me angry or nagging at me about something.

When we were separated I realized that I was the one that needed to change...even if Trisha never changed, I was desperate for God to change me. What we have learned is that yes our marriage is emotional...yes, our marriage is physical...but more than anything our marriage is a SPIRITUAL relationship and if we don't take that seriously, the very foundation of our relationship will be eroded little by little.

Here is the truth: If you want to grow in your intimacy with your spouse...if you want your spouse to pursue you again...if you want your spouse to respect you again...if you want your spouse to find you attractive again...if you want your spouse to forgive you again...if you want your spouse to love you again like they loved you when you were first married...pray for God to change you into the person your spouse needs you to be. That is the first part...the second is a little more vulnerable and much more uncomfortable when you first start...and that is to pray out loud together. The quickest way I can gauge Trisha's heart and know what is bugging her or making her anxious or on her mind is to listen to her pray...it is a spiritual way to know her heart and to align my heart with hers. Let me be clear, if you haven't done this before, this will probably feel weird...but get over it! It is so worth it...and let me promise you that you will relate deeper, you will talk more, you will love more completely through this one act...I guarantee it.

#2-We consistently gave each other the left-overs from our day and not the best.

How does it happen in a marriage that over time, we stop giving our spouse the best of who we are and we give them what ever is left at the end of the day? Your boss gets your best or your clients get your best, or your customers get your best, your laundry gets your time and attention, and your Facebook gets its time, your to-do list gets priority...but at the end of the day, we settle for giving our spouse less than our best. Here is what is toxic...this becomes a vicious cycle that is hard to break.

I come home from the office and Trisha has the laundry done and the kitchen cleaned and the kids bathed, and dinner ready...and I walk in exhausted, overwhelmed, frustrated...whatever...and all I say is “We’re having pasta again? Really?” With that one statement, with that one act of withholding my best, I have destroyed the effort that she has given to offer her best. You know what she is thinking in that moment “My best isn’t good enough.”

On the other hand, I leave work early, go buy flowers, find a babysitter, make dinner reservations and plan a perfect evening without the kids, only to come home and hear “You must be trying really hard to make up for something. If you think that this means you’re getting lucky tonight, think again!” That statement totally defeats a husband who has done what he can to offer his best. You know what I am thinking in that moment “Why should I even try, my best obviously isn’t good enough.” And so the cycle goes...

When Trisha and I were separated, I worked at P.F. Chang’s as a server. I went from speaking to 500 people each weekend, to “Would you like white or brown rice?” One night as I was closing my section, I had a table of several high school students that had come in for dinner after their school dance. They were loud and rude and made a huge mess and hung out so long that I was one of the last servers to leave. After they left, I was on my hands and knees under their table sweeping up rice and crushed up fortune cookies with my hands into a dust pan...I stood up and looked on the table, and they had left me a \$5 tip! I thought I am busting my butt cleaning up after these kids who could care less about me...when is the last time I have done this at home? When is the last time I have given to Trisha like I am giving at P.F. Chang’s for a flimsy \$5 tip?

What about you in your marriage right now? Who is getting your best? Maybe you are so concerned about a clean house you forget about the husband who lives there? Maybe you are so tracked on “providing” for your family, you fail to prioritize the family you are providing for. This is so subtle and it happens little by little...and it takes a conscious effort to battle this fatal mistake. Greatness doesn’t just happen...it is achieved by consistently giving your best...and that is true in your marriage. I say a prayer every single night on my way home and it goes something like this “God, I have given my best effort today at work. I have given my best to my boss, I have given my best to my clients, I have given my best to people I will never meet, and only care about me to the extent that it benefits them...help me give 110% to 4 people who love me unconditionally and deserve so much more than what I have given to others today.”

#3-Our marriage put us in the same house but we were not always on the same team.

Let me give you an example of how this played out in one area of our marriage...

Like most married couples, Trisha and I have certain roles in our marriage. One of the things I was responsible for was our budget and paying the bills. Trisha knew how much money I made per pay check and she knew when I got paid...beyond that, I didn’t share much about our finances with her. This was a *constant* stress in our relationship...she never knew where we stood financially and I always got on her for spending money that we didn’t have. Most of the conversations we would have about money were after she came home from Wal-Mart with groceries or with socks and underwear for the boys. I would go off that she spent money that she didn’t get approved with me...she didn’t know what bills

were coming out that week and in my mind she was spending money faster than I could make it (as a pastor you don't make money very fast).

The truth was, I was a horrible money manager. I would justify purchases by using credit cards or 90-days same as cash or put off paying a bill for a month so that we could buy something on an impulse. (I called it creative financing...it is really called stupid debt) She saw me as a control freak and a hypocrite because in her mind, I could spend the money how I saw fit, but would always get on her and question every dime she spent...so she resented me. Here was the reality: I was so ashamed of the financial condition I had put us in, I wanted to keep her in the dark...and I was too proud to ask for help. I thought for sure that if she knew how bad I led our finances, she would lose respect for me. The result was that we were never on the same team financially...we were constantly working against each other, rather than being one as God intended.

What you and your spouse need is a rock solid belief that no matter what-"we are in this together." The absence of that belief erodes our intimacy and trust with one another. Over time you begin to question if this person really has your best intentions at heart...and that is a downward spiral. What comes next is withholding truth, hiddenness and reoccurring fights that you have no idea how they started or why they started...and you rarely resolve them. When you begin to hold your spouse suspect and question their intentions...that is a huge clue that you are not on the same page and you are not on the same team. When people choose divorce this is termed "irreconcilable differences." But, trust me, your differences can be reconciled...and leveraged to make your relationship even better!

Maybe for you right now, you and your spouse are not a team when it comes to your finances...and there are constant arguments about money. Maybe for you it is your spouse's career...and they are driven to work longer and earn more, and you feel their decision has caused you to question what is most important to them...and you always argue about it. Maybe you aren't a team in how you discipline your kids...and you constantly feel like your spouse is undermining your authority or being condescending to you in front of your kids...and you argue in front of your kids about how to parent your kids.

When Trisha and I were separated, she, for the first time saw all of our bills. She realized my lack of leadership in this area...everything was out in the open. When we began to go to counseling, one of the things that we made a commitment to is that in every single thing we are going to assume the best of the other person, and move forward from there. We don't always get this right...but we are quick to recognize when we are off...and we talk about it and we seek forgiveness and we realign our hearts. This mistake will quickly move you from being married to co-existing in the same house...and you will wake up one day and think, "There has to be more than this." There is...God calls it *ONENESS* and it is available. But the price tag is honesty, vulnerability and humility. When you offer those things and assume the best of your spouse, there is a supernatural force working in your relationship to bring about oneness and joy in doses that will blow you away.

#4-We failed to dream big dreams for our marriage and our family.

The last day of our cruise, we ended up at a seafood restaurant for lunch before heading to the airport. We sat down to eat, and Trisha started bawling...like someone was hurt bawling. I asked her what was wrong and she just said, "I don't want to go back. This is the first time since we got married that I have

had you to myself. It is first time that our life didn't revolve around the church." But we did go back, and we went back to the same patterns and same behavior, that ultimately led to our marriage hitting bottom...3 months later.

Here is the truth...we set goals and we had dreams. We dreamed about launching a new church. We set goals for our weekly attendance and offering. We had dreams about how many people would join a small group. We set goals for how many people we wanted serving in the church. We dreamed about baptisms and child dedications. We were so busy with life and kids and church and ministry, that we forgot to dream about what our marriage could and should be. We weren't intentional to dream about who our family could be...didn't take time to set goals for where we wanted to be in 5 years as individuals or as a couple.

It may seem like a little thing, but this one area has transformed our marriage. We all have dreams...we all have aspirations...we all have a sense of destiny and a God-given desire to make our lives count. When we began to go to counseling, I realized that our entire marriage had centered around me and the call that God had placed in my heart. I knew that God had placed a call and a vision in Trisha's heart too and I wanted her to share it. So, one night at Red Lobster, I said to Trisha, "What are your dreams?" She didn't think I was serious...so I said it again. "Our whole marriage has revolved around who I wanted to become...who do you want to become?" She started to tear up and began to share with me her dreams for our marriage...her dreams for our boys...her heart for our family and goals for her life personally. It was the first time that we had a discussion about her dreams with no strings attached...no wrong answers...no limits.

What we have realized is that we are dreamers. We love to imagine how God could use us and change us and grow us. Part of our role as spouses is to be used by God to draw out and help complete each others dreams. We sit down and set goals for our family...spiritual goals, financial goals, and even ministry goals. Some we hit, others we don't...but the point is that we know more deeply each others desires, heart and passions.

When is the last time you have had a conversation like that? What if on Saturday, you went out to dinner with your spouse and you said "What are your dreams for our marriage? What are your dreams for your life? Who do you hope to be in five years? How can I help you get there?" Your spouse may be desperate to dream again...and to dream again with you. What a gift you could offer with 4 simple words "What are your dreams?"

#5-When we argued with one another, our objective was to be right (Trisha) or to be at peace (me), rather than to grow closer through our conflict.

We got married the summer before my senior year of college. We were young and in love and somewhat took pride in the fact we never really had a major argument through our time dating. But, man do I remember our first argument...I don't remember what it was about, but I remember how it ended. Trisha looked at me and said, "I hate you." Argument over! Whatever the issue was, in that moment, she was right and I was wrong. I never wanted her to feel that way again...so I apologized for whatever I did and we moved on.

As kids came into the picture and ministry responsibilities increased and our life got out of balance, I began to measure the success of our marriage by the absence of conflict. So if we *didn't* argue more than we normally argued, then it was a good week. When conflict arose, I knew that Trisha was probably

going to be right; I was probably going to be wrong. I knew the easiest way to move on was to identify why she was mad, try not to make her angrier by saying I thought she was wrong, and just apologize. She would feel better because she was right...I would feel better because there wasn't conflict.

This pattern got so ridiculous in our relationship that it came to a head on a Saturday night about 6 months before we separated. Trisha was leading worship the next morning and I was speaking (probably on conflict resolution or something)...and we get into this huge argument. After a while, I look up and it is 1:00 AM. I am freaking out. Finally, I just said, "Please just tell me what I need to apologize for so we can go to bed. We can't lead people closer to God tomorrow if we are like this." My motivation for resolving our conflict had nothing to do with growing closer to her...nothing to do with becoming more of who God had created us to be...it was the fact that I wanted to stand on a stage with a clear conscious and have people be impressed with who I was pretending to be.

What I have realized is that so often God uses Trisha in my life to hold up a mirror to my soul and expose things in my heart that I wouldn't see otherwise...and he uses me to do the same for her. When I avoid conflict and when Trisha just pushes to be right, we cheat a *refining* process that God is doing in our life and in our marriage. Don't get me wrong...I don't look forward to fighting with my wife...but when we do disagree and argue...most of the time I recognize it as an opportunity to grow closer through the conflict.

This played out in our life yesterday as Trisha and I got into an argument. We just weren't seeing things the same way. What was so cool and what brought this mistake to my mind is to see how far God has brought us. Our conversation got intense and each of us voiced our opinion...but we were both going to stay with the discussion for the right reasons...she wasn't demanding she was right and I wasn't trying to apologize so the conflict would magically go away. We were both committed to allowing God to work in us through what the other person had to say...and by sticking with it we understood each other's hearts more in the end.

If you are living your life right now trying to manage your conflict...hoping you don't argue as much this week as you did last week...I know how miserable that can be. God's desire is to use the conflict in our marriages to grow us more into the husband and wife he longs for us to be. How do you handle conflict in your marriage? Is there a conversation you could have this week that would allow you to leverage your conflict to become more *ONE* with your spouse? There is hope...we started with "I hate you." And look how far we've come!

#6 Forgiveness – forfeiting our future by not forgiving the past

Some of the stories we have shared over the past couple of days have been our deepest and darkest lows. Lows of behavioral patterns that honestly we didn't understand or believe could cause such collateral damage. I have cut out so many paragraphs of this blog of thoughts I would like to share. Grace, redemption and forgiveness are so intertwined. But in the midst of all of these lows, I would like to focus (at least for today) on my inability to get past the past and truly forgive.

When we had our first son Micah in 1996, Justin was a youth pastor in Ohio. He planned a trip to leave for a youth conference five days after Micah was born and because I was young and naïve I was cool

with him going. That is... until Micah was actually born. When he left for the conference I was so angry with him and felt like he abandoned me to be a single mom. In weeks and years to follow, anytime Justin and I would fight I would use past hurts like the one I just shared to make Justin see how wrong he was and how right I was. The scary thing is whether we were fighting about finances or family issues, I usually was right and the proof was in the past.

The reality of our relationship was that I had a fatal heart condition in which I didn't want to forgive past hurts! I wanted to cling to the past and hold onto my rights of being right and it slowly killed our relationship! No matter what we fought about Justin had messed-up in that area before and would continue to do so for years to come and I made sure he knew it. What a hopeless place for Justin to be. If he knows that I can't truly forgive him for preaching a sermon the same weekend I was having a baby or not being home for supper when he told me he would be then HOW ON EARTH would I forgive him for something big...like having an affair?

It's sad to say, but for me all of those years of unhealthy patterns didn't cause enough pain to bring about change in me. It took Justin having an affair for me to hit rock bottom and for the first time face the reality of losing Justin. So what would I choose? Now more than ever I had the right to be the martyr! I had the right to have a faithful husband...I had the right to be angry! Do you see where I am going with this? Not much forgiveness here.

Following Christ through all of this meant one thing.... daily handing over my rights to him. Being bitter and angry would eventually lead to my own demise. (Ephesians 4:26) Sin eventually eats away at you convincing you to stick with your rights! But slowly through prayer, counseling, conversations with trusted friends and Justin, Jesus revealed to me that when I laid down my rights to be right and learn to forgive true healing would take place.

I'm not talking about forgiveness for the sake of reconciliation. I am talking about finding freedom by offering forgiveness that is independent of the person's condition or response. In other words my forgiveness was not conditional. Instead of needing Justin to be the lover of my soul I found Jesus was. When I laid down my rights and offered forgiveness I was able to see the bigger picture of Justin's pain and my own heart condition. I found freedom in confessing my own issues, taking ownership of them and forgiving myself for what I contributed to our marriage. I found freedom in forgiving Justin regardless if he chose to stay or leave.

#7- We forgot to focus on all of the reasons why we loved each other.

The day after we separated, I went into a counseling appointment not knowing if I wanted to stay married. I will be very honest and say that I was in a dark place. I sat down in the chair and the counselor asked me "Why do you not want to be married to your wife?" Without even thinking I was able to rattle off all of the things that Trisha did that got on my nerves. I had thought and meditated on all of the ways that Trisha made me angry, all of the habits that she had that drove me crazy. After I got done, the counselor looked at me and said "Wow...she sounds awful. I can't believe you would fall in love with someone like that. Why did you ever marry her in the first place.?"

When we were dating our spouse, we had an alternative perspective of our differences. We spent most of the time we weren't with one another thinking about how their differences and their idiosyncrasies would improve our life or make us more complete. We thought about how cute their laugh was or how we loved their carefree attitude and their laid back style. We told them how much we loved how organized they were or how we admired their assertiveness. We loved how close they were to their mom, we admired that they had a desire to succeed in their job. When we were dating we laughed off the clothes that were all over the floor in their closet; we thought it was cute how they were always running 10 minutes late. So much of who they were complimented everything we were not...and that was what caused us to fall in love.

But at some point in our marriage, the very things we fell in love with became the very things that we couldn't stand about our spouse. The things that we felt like completed us now drive us crazy and cause arguments and resentment. At some point in our marriages, it became much easier to focus on the faults of our spouse, rather than the things that we love about them.

A few days after my first counseling appointment, I went back and the counselor asked me spend some time over the weekend and think of at least fifty things that I love about my wife. I was nervous as I left her office that I wouldn't be able to think of that many things. I went back to the house where I was staying and began to make a list of the all of the things that I loved about my wife. I realized a couple of things that afternoon:

1. Some things that I had allowed to get on my nerves were the very things that I loved about how God had created her.
2. My depth of love for my wife grew deeper the more I meditated and thought about all of the attributes I loved.

I have talked to so many couples that are struggling in their relationship and they are so quick to list several things that their spouse does that drive them nuts. When I ask, "What do you absolutely adore about your spouse. I know what pisses you off...but what brings you joy?" The predominate response I hear is "Wow...I haven't thought about that for a long time."

I make it a point every week to tell my wife the things that I love about her. Sometimes I write them in a note and put that note by the coffee maker. Sometimes I send it in a text message. Sometimes I write it in erasable marker on our mirror. Last Valentine's Day, I typed up 30 things that I love about Trisha and cut them into strips of paper and put them in a red box for her to read one per day for the next 30 days.

How could your relationship grow and change if you chose to focus on everything you love about your spouse. Maybe the things you dislike would be taken care of because your spouse would feel so loved and so valued that they would desire to value you in return by addressing the habits you have been griping about for years. So often we think that reminding one another how imperfect we are will bring about change. Change comes out of a loving relationship that shows mutual respect and admiration. So allow me to save you a trip to counseling and pass along a homework assignment: Before this weekend is over, sit down and list at least 20 things you love about your spouse. Even if you never share it, I guarantee you that YOU will be changed by doing so...and if you choose to share it, your spouse will be changed too.

#8- I bought into the lie that by withholding truth from my wife I was saving her and my marriage from needless pain.

When Trisha and I began counseling, we went to fix the brokenness caused by the affair. But what I began to see was a pattern of withholding truth from my wife. The affair was what got the attention...it got the headlines...but it was only the outcome of years and years of withholding truth from Trisha. I had so much brokenness in my heart and so much hurt in my past that I had never discussed with her. I experienced sexual abuse as a child, and never talked about it with her. I had an addiction to pornography that I struggled with for 10 years that not only did I not admit, I flat out told her that I didn't struggle with sexual sins and lustful thoughts like other guys did. I struggled with pride and arrogance...but not those sexual sins.

Here is what I have learned about this principle of withholding truth. You and I were created to be ONE with our spouse. God says that we "will leave our father and our mother and we will become 'one flesh'". When you withhold truth from the one that God has ordained in your life for you to be ONE with, there is something that gets fractured in that relationship. I don't care if the withholding of truth is small or if it is significant, that "oneness" is compromised. What happens is that we learn as married couples to live with the absence of God given "oneness". We learn to live with the version of oneness that we can create. But for so many couples, distance in our relationship with our spouse becomes the norm and we just resign to the fact that this must be as good as it will ever get. I want to tell you that you are buying into a lie that is straight from the pit of hell. We convince ourselves that if we share these dark parts of our heart that we will lose everything, but by not sharing it, we begin to lose everything. That is not how your Heavenly Father longs for your marriage to be...he longs for unity and holiness and oneness.

When we started on this journey 3 ½ years ago, this was a huge step for us. But we have both committed to not withholding anything from one another and for this to work for you it will take a commitment by both you and your spouse. Sometimes it will be painful. It isn't easy to sit up until 2 AM talking about struggles, fears and past mistakes. But we have found it is MUCH more painful to withhold those things from one another and would rather have pain in the short term and intimacy in the long term.

Maybe for you, like me you struggle with being a truth teller. Maybe you have denied your weakness or you haven't come clean about your addiction or shameful habit. Maybe you haven't even gone there with your spouse because you are afraid of their answer. Maybe you have withheld a truth from your spouse since the day you met...maybe you had sex with someone in college that you have never told your spouse about...maybe you have charged up the credit cards and you have kept your spouse in the dark about your finances...maybe you have lost your job and it is over at the end of this quarter and you are too ashamed to share that with your spouse...maybe you have feelings for someone in your office...and you think you can handle it.

When we withhold TRUTH from our spouse, as hurtful as we think that truth might be, we forfeit intimacy and oneness. As we come to the close of this series, I want to encourage you to trust in the power of God in this area and allow him to restore a level of oneness and intimacy to your relationship that you both crave. It will cost you something now, but what you will gain in the end will be more than you could ask or imagine.