

Choosing to Love: *Radical Acceptance*

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT

Soon, my daughter will be walking down the aisle to marry a man she loves. Couples in the throes of loving bliss vary; they may love times of joy-filled chatter or peaceful, comfortable silence. Everything tends to be “so cute” or “absolutely wonderful!” These descriptions frequently litter couples’ early histories.



Life becomes busy. There are children, jobs, sports, and church. We wave as we pass by, except to discuss schedules and task completions. We forget what it was about our spouse that we adored and increasingly target the negatives. It reminds me of the parable of the sower. Jesus says: “The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22, NIV). The “worries of this life” slowly strangle the marriage. It breaks my heart when I hear clients describe a marital field that used to be beautiful and fruitful becoming so full of weeds they no longer see a crop. These couples no longer love each other for who they are.

We must choose to love our spouses just the way they are for our marriages to stay healthy. We must choose to love our spouses with radical acceptance.

What is Radical Acceptance?

Radical acceptance is:

- Recognizing reality,
- Not attempting to control,
- Not attempting to protest, and
- Just resting.

Spouses do things we perceive are absolutely wrong. They might become, or are becoming, people we don’t like very much. We practice radical acceptance when we don’t try to change, control or manipulate them to get our own way. We once loved our spouses just the way they **were**. We can accept them just the way they **are**.

Unconditional Love

We crave chemistry and romance, which focuses on self. When we nurture this conditional love, our irritation increases when our spouses aren’t exactly who or what we want. Our spouses fear making mistakes and unavoidable physical changes. It is demanding and disrespectful. Marriages sustained on conditional love will almost always wither from malnutrition. Marriage lasts when we love a person just as they are. Unconditional love also focuses on our spouses, *loving* them just as they are. Sometimes we sacrifice what we want for them.

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According to 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8, unconditional love is:



- *Patient* - persevering with a smile during troubles;
- *Kind* - friendly, generous, warm-hearted;
- *Not envious, boastful, or proud* - puts the other person first;
- *Not easily angered* - open to criticism without becoming defensive too quickly;
- *Keeps no record of wrongs* - forgiving;
- *Rejoices when they choose to do what is right*;
- *Protecting* - from damage, injury, difficulty or unpleasantness;
- *Trusting* - placing confidence in their best intentions;
- *Hopeful* - optimistic; and
- *Never gives up.*

We choose to pay attention to what is important to our spouses; we affirm them and tell our friends about what our spouses do RIGHT. We listen to their problems with us, and ask God to see the truth about ourselves and our need for change. Unconditional love acts with grace and mercy. Radical acceptance shifts our focus from ourselves to our spouses so that we can act in loving ways, with loving attitudes-- connected to both our spouses and God.

Moving from Acceptance to Love when We Hurt

Jesus told a parable about weeds that grew among the wheat. The weeds remained in the fields until the wheat was ready for harvest, so the wheat wouldn't get damaged by the weeding. It didn't matter that the weeds were planted by the enemy; he burned them off at the end (*Matthew 13:24-30*). We use radical acceptance to focus on the wheat. We trust that the weeds will be taken care of by the Master Gardener (*Matthew 13:30*).

When we are hurt, we love responsibly by:

- Speaking our feelings about what is bothering us (kindly, truthfully, without repetition),
- Letting our spouse know what we want nicely,
- Praying diligently for God's will in the situation,
- Forgiving: hand our hurt feelings and the situation over to God (sometimes it helps to picture it), and
- Giving God an opportunity to work.

Please understand it is natural to hold on. This usually requires a great deal of practice. Whenever we find ourselves trying to change our spouse in something already addressed, repeating the last three steps helps retrain us to let go.

If we practice radical acceptance and choose to love our spouse for who they are right now, we will find unconditional love growing. We become more like Christ. ■

"...he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead..." (Ephesians 2:4-5, NLT)



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