To Build a Better Marriage

By Brent A. Barlow

There are two all-too-universal truths in human behavior when people are in conflict: (1) it’s always the other person’s fault; and (2) a person will change only after the other decides to change, or “give in” in some way. Few of us have the capacity or desire to look at our own behavior objectively and see what part we may have in both the origin and solution of the problem.

This is particularly true in marriage relationships. When trouble, conflict, or problems occur, the human tendency is to blame one’s marriage partner first. Then we often refuse to make any initial effort for change until, with our incessant promptings, our spouse acknowledges the errors of his or her ways. We say or think things like: “If only he would …,” or “If only she could. …” Then we list, literally or mentally, all the changes our spouse needs to make to improve the marriage.

Of Beams and Motes

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior revealed one of the greatest insights to this human tendency, and gave what is sometimes called the Change-First Principle. He said:

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s [or spouse’s] eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother [or spouse], Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s [or spouse’s] eye.” (Matt. 7:3–5.)

Jesus was a carpenter. For him, a beam was a large piece of wood and a mote was a small speck of sawdust. In metaphor, he was asking his disciples (including husbands and wives) why they were so skilled in perceiving the small inadequacies in others and yet were oblivious or nearly blinded to their own larger imperfections. To overcome this common human weakness, Jesus admonished them to change first—to “cast out” or overcome their own imperfections—and then they would be less inclined to try to change someone else’s smaller inadequacies.

Today, counselors and therapists who deal with human behavior often give similar advice to married couples whose problems are not so serious that they involve violations of law or marriage vows.
We Can’t Command Change

Most husbands and wives who love each other will try to make small, reasonable changes in their relationship so their marriage can be more stable and satisfying. But there is danger in equating the willingness of another to change with that person’s love and commitment to the marriage. In a recent book, two psychologists wrote that it is a myth that your mate must change for you if he or she really loves you. They explained: “Couples sometimes go on trying to change each other long after it is clear that it won’t work. What happens is that the one who wants change begins to build a case that gets increasingly extreme and dramatic, even obsessional, as though the validity of the marriage hinged on some specific change. Getting a spouse to change becomes tantamount to getting him or her to love you.”

They added: “You are allowing yourself to equate change with love whenever you find yourself being unrelenting in your effort to persuade your spouse to be different. Some of the clues are constant criticism, nagging, and at times uncontrolled irritability.”

Of course, when we speak of the pitfalls in pressuring a marriage partner to change his or her behavior, we are speaking of normal day-to-day behaviors common to most marital relationships. It may be necessary at times, however, to insist on changes in a marriage partner, because some behaviors cannot be tolerated or negotiated. These include problems with infidelity, dishonesty, mental and physical abuse, substance abuse, prolonged neglect, illegal activities, or other similar acts.

The Law of the Harvest

Closely related to the Change-First Principle, I believe, are the Law of the Harvest and the Law of the Boomerang. All three concepts emphasize both the importance and the consequences of individual effort.

The Law of the Harvest is simply that we reap what we sow. (See Gal. 6:7.) This idea has troubled some people who are unhappily married because it suggests that they are reaping the consequences of earlier acts in marriage and are responsible, in part, for what is happening. This is not necessarily true. In some cases, however, a husband or wife who did not originally sow the seeds of discord, unhappiness, or disharmony may have helped nurture their growth. That illustrates the negative aspect of the Law of the Harvest.

Here is the positive side of the Law of the Harvest: If you want a better relationship with a marriage partner, change first. Plant the seeds of harmony, trust, and love, and then nurture them long enough for them to grow. The promise is that eventually you will reap what you sow.

Some couples in troubled marriages or families may be hesitant to start over if previous efforts have been unsuccessful. But the Law of the Harvest still holds. It has been reiterated in latter-day revelation: “Fear not to do good … for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward.

“Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good.” (D&C 6:33–34.)
The Law of the Boomerang

Similarly, the Law of the Boomerang teaches us: “What goes out comes back.” How we treat others generally becomes the way they treat us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonished: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” (Matt. 7:12.) Commonly called the Golden Rule, this teaching urges us to treat others the way we would like to be treated. It is timely advice for married couples. Usually, a husband or wife will eventually return the loving treatment we consistently give.

The Law of the Boomerang is taught in at least three other scriptures. Alma chastised his son, Corianton, for questionable conduct, and then noted: “For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again.” (Alma 41:15.) In Ecclesiastes, we read: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” (Eccl. 11:1.) Luke noted: “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good [honest] measure, pressed down, and shaken together [for full compensation], and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.” (Luke 6:38.)

Where to Begin?

If you want to change yourself in order to improve your marriage, how can you know where to begin? You might ask yourself these key questions: “What would it be like to be married to me? What if my spouse were exactly like me—what would he/she be like to live with?” Start there. Begin with changes you could make in your life right now that would make you easier to live with and your marriage more tolerable for your spouse.

Another way to learn about needed changes in your own life is simply to ask. First ask the Lord, for he has promised, “If men [and women] come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. … If they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.” (Ether 12:27.)

At an appropriate time—not when there is a spirit of contention present—you might also ask your husband or wife what changes you need to make in your behavior. Not long ago I was invited to teach a priesthood lesson in our ward on husband-wife relationships. During the lesson, I asked the quorum members how many would like to receive a revelation. Every hand went up. I then suggested that we all go home and ask our wives how we could be better husbands. (I should add that I followed my own advice, and had a very informative discussion with Susan for more than an hour that afternoon!)

The Road to Change

What if we as husbands and wives decided individually to take responsibility for our own lives and “change first” with regard to spiritual matters?

If we individually, and then jointly, sought the companionship of the Holy Ghost in our daily lives, our marriages could become stronger and happier.
If we exercised great patience with each other’s weaknesses and shortcomings, if we dropped the constant insistence that our spouses change, perhaps we could create an atmosphere in our marriages that would allow self-initiated change to take place.

The psychologists cited earlier have pointed out a fundamental truth about marriage: “There must be a void created for any new patterns to be established. And releasing one’s mate from the burden of having to meet unrealistic expectations allows him or her to perceive you in a new way and to think about being different on his or her own terms.” 2

Joseph Smith said: “It is a time-honored adage that love begets love. Let us pour forth love—show forth our kindness unto all mankind, and the Lord will reward us with everlasting increase; cast our bread upon the waters and we shall receive it after many days, increased to an hundredfold. …

“I do not dwell upon your faults, and you shall not upon mine. Charity, which is love, covereth a multitude of sins.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 316; italics added.)

When we have learned to let charity cover the faults of the companions we love, we will probably feel their love more strongly, and more often. And we will be better prepared to build enduring marriages.

Brent A. Barlow, “To Build a Better Marriage,” Ensign, Sept. 1992, 15

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 73.