Issue 60 - It Isn’t Bad Enough Yet

Messy Story of the Week

When Emily’s friend asked how things were going with Nathan, she gave the answer she usually gave.

“Fine.”

It was not exactly dishonest. Nathan was still affectionate. They enjoyed watching shows together after the kids went to bed. He worked hard, helped with bedtime, and remembered how she liked her coffee.

They were not talking about divorce. No one was having an affair. There were no screaming matches or holes punched in walls.

Compared with marriages that were truly struggling, theirs did seem fine.

But Emily had become careful about what she brought up.

If she mentioned that she needed more help, Nathan heard criticism. If she tried to explain why something mattered to her, he responded with reasons she should not be as concerned as she was. If he came home irritated and she asked what was wrong, he accused her of interrogating him.

Eventually, Emily would become frustrated enough to speak sharply. Nathan would withdraw, and they would spend the rest of the evening discussing only what the children needed and who was responsible for the next day’s schedule.

By morning, they would act normal again.

Nothing had been resolved, but nothing dramatic had happened either.

Her friend knew them well enough not to accept “fine” without question.

“You’ve mentioned this same argument several times,” she said. “Have you thought about getting some help with it?”

Emily immediately shook her head.

“It isn’t bad enough for that.”

Her friend did not argue. She simply asked, “How bad does it need to be?”

Emily did not know.

Did someone have to threaten to leave? Did they have to stop enjoying each other entirely? Did every conversation need to become an argument instead of only certain ones?

That evening, Nathan noticed that she was unusually quiet.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Emily almost said, “Nothing.”

Instead, she told him about the conversation.

“I’m not saying our marriage is terrible,” she explained. “It isn’t. But I’ve realized that I don’t know what I’m waiting for. We keep having the same problem, and we keep hoping that the next conversation will somehow go differently.”

Nathan was silent for a moment.

Then he said, “You think we need marriage counseling?”

“I think we need skills we don’t have yet.”

Nathan did not immediately agree. Like Emily, he could list many reasons their marriage was not in crisis.

But that was not really the question.

The question was whether they wanted to keep practicing the same pattern until it became one.

Faithful God, Then and Now

Apollos was not a foolish or careless man.

Scripture describes him as eloquent, knowledgeable in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, and diligent in teaching about the Lord. He was already using what he knew faithfully.

But his understanding was incomplete.

> “Now a certain Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by race, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus. He was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of John.”
>
> —Acts 18:24–25, WEB

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him speak, they recognized what was missing.

They did not publicly humiliate him or dismiss everything he was already doing well. They took him aside and helped him understand more fully.

> "He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside, and explained to him the way of God more accurately."
>
> —Acts 18:26, WEB

Apollos did not have to experience a catastrophic failure before he could benefit from instruction. His willingness to learn strengthened what was already good and equipped him to serve more effectively.

That matters for marriage too.

A couple can love each other and still have more to learn. They can be committed, faithful, hardworking people and still misunderstand what happens during conflict. They can possess many strengths while lacking specific skills for listening, emotional regulation, problem-solving, or repair.

The need to learn does not erase what is already good.

Sometimes instruction helps us protect and strengthen the good before a repeated pattern begins to bury it.

What We Can Learn

- **"Not terrible" is not the same as healthy.** A marriage can contain affection, commitment, and many good moments while still carrying patterns that need attention.
- **Recurring problems deserve curiosity.** The presence of conflict is not automatically alarming. But when a couple repeatedly reaches the same painful ending, they may need a different process—not another attempt at the same conversation.
- **Avoidance can disguise itself as peace.** If you have stopped discussing certain subjects because the conversations never go well, the absence of arguments may not mean the problem has been resolved.
- **Skills are easier to learn before every interaction carries accumulated hurt.** Couples usually have more flexibility when they are practicing new responses alongside goodwill rather than trying to rebuild after years of resentment.
- **Healthy people remain teachable.** Apollos's willingness to receive instruction strengthened his work. In the same way, learning new relationship skills can strengthen a marriage that already contains much worth protecting.

Behind the Curtain

When couples wonder whether they need help, they often compare themselves with marriages that appear to be in much greater distress.

They may say:

- “We still love each other.”
- “We don’t fight all the time.”
- “Neither of us wants a divorce.”
- “Other couples have much bigger problems.”
- “It’s probably just the stress we’re under right now.”

All of those things may be true.

But deciding whether a pattern deserves attention is not the same as deciding whether your marriage is terrible.

A more useful question is:

When this problem appears, do we know how to work through it together?

Sometimes a difficult season places temporary strain on an otherwise workable process. The couple can name what is happening, listen to one another, make adjustments, repair mistakes, and gradually regain their balance.

At other times, the couple’s way of responding creates additional injuries:

- A concern is met with defensiveness.
- Defensiveness leads to sharper criticism.
- Criticism leads to withdrawal.
- Withdrawal increases the other spouse’s urgency.
- The original problem becomes tangled with questions about love, respect, trust, or whether it is emotionally safe to speak honestly.

The concern may have started small. The pattern is what makes it grow.

Couples do not have to wait until they are considering separation before learning how to interrupt that process.

Faithful Family Tools

One way to determine whether your marriage may benefit from support is to look for patterns rather than isolated incidents.

Consider whether any of these happen regularly:

- You have different versions of the same argument.
- Ordinary questions are frequently interpreted as criticism.
- One of you pursues conversation while the other withdraws.
- You solve the practical issue but never address the hurt underneath it.
- Apologies end the discussion but do not create meaningful repair.
- Certain subjects are avoided because neither of you expects the conversation to go well.
- You understand your own intentions but rarely feel understood by your spouse.
- You are beginning to assume that the pattern will never change.

One sign alone does not prove that a marriage is in serious trouble. But recurring patterns are worth noticing while both people still have hope, energy, and goodwill available for learning something new.

Marriage coaching can help couples slow those patterns down, identify what each person is contributing, and practice more effective ways to communicate and repair.

You do not have to prove that your marriage is “bad enough” to benefit from learning.

Work With Tanja: https://faithfulfamilycoaching.com/apply

Newsletter

If this issue brought a couple to mind, forward it with encouragement rather than alarm:

“I appreciated the reminder that we don’t have to wait for a crisis before learning something new.”

Community

Join the Faithful Families community for practical conversations about marriage, parenting, emotional maturity, and taking faithful next steps in ordinary family life.

Join the community:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/tanjascoachingcommunity

Blog

Find more encouragement and practical tools for faithful family relationships at:

FaithfulFamilyCoaching.com

Faith Step for the Week

Bible Passage

Read Acts 18:24–28.

Notice how many strengths Scripture names in Apollos before revealing the gap in his understanding.

Consider:

- What was Apollos already doing well?
- How did Priscilla and Aquila respond when they recognized what he did not yet understand?
- What might have happened if Apollos had interpreted their instruction as an insult?
- Where might becoming more teachable strengthen something that is already good in your marriage?

Two-Minute Practice

Complete these two sentences separately:

> **One thing we already do well in our marriage is _____.**
>
> **One recurring situation I wish we knew how to handle better is _____.**

Then share your answers.

Do not begin solving the second answer immediately. Start by recognizing the first.

You might say:

> "I'm grateful that we _____. I don't think our marriage is failing. I would like us to learn a better way to handle _____ because what we have is worth caring for."

This changes the conversation from:

> "Something is wrong with us."

to:

> "Something good between us deserves continued growth."

Prayer

> Faithful God,
> thank You for the good that already exists in our marriage. Help us recognize it, protect it, and continue building upon it. Give us humility to admit what we have not yet learned and courage to seek wisdom before our difficulties become deeper wounds. Teach us to receive instruction without shame and to offer truth to one another with gentleness. Form us into people who remain willing to learn how to love more faithfully.
>
> Amen.

Coming Next

Repeated patterns do more than produce repeated arguments. Over time, they begin shaping the stories spouses tell about one another: *She doesn't respect me. He doesn't care. There is no point in trying.*

Next week, we will look at how unresolved patterns harden into conclusions—and why seeking help becomes more difficult once we feel certain that we already understand the other person's motives.