

“Till Death Do Us Part” Series
Sermon 5: “Eros Love”
June 7, 2015

So, if we haven't said anything to annoy you or embarrass you yet in this little series on a God-honoring marriage, well ... I'll give it a shot this morning. You see, the Bible is pretty much an equal opportunity annoyance. It irritates people who are not yet Jesus followers, because it is about as un-PC as it gets. And it irritates people who are Jesus followers because it meddles a lot, and frankly, it is not a G-rated book. There are places where it is at least PG-13, and sometimes flat out R-rated.

Do you know why? Because even for us Jesus followers, life is not always G-rated. Sometimes there is graphic brutality and violence. Sometimes there is strong language and profanity. Sometimes there is nudity and sex and other adult themes. At least I hope there is, in your marriages. And the Bible talks to real people, who are trying to manage real life – God's way. So ... if we are going to study the Bible, if we are going to try to learn about doing life with God, God's way, from His Word, we're going to dip into something things from time to time which will annoy you, or embarrass you. Because if we don't talk about the alligators, people will keep walking around missing an arm, or a leg.

Now one of the things we have said in this series is that marriage is the deepest, and the richest, and the most complex of all human relationships. It is the only place where God expects all the different forms of love to be explored to the fullest.

- Two weeks ago we talked about agape love – that's covenant love. That's the kind of love that doesn't quit, even when eros love fades from time to time. Agape is an action love: “I choose to love, even when you are not loveable.”
- Last week we talked about phileo love – friendship love. Friendship love happens when two people love something else together. It's the love of a common passion, of a common quest. We pursue something together, we build something together. And for us Jesus followers, our primary mission in marriage is to hand our spouse back to God better than we got them – more God loving, more God-like.

- This week is about another kind of love ... this kind of love most people think is the heart of marriage. It's not! We're going to talk about eros – feeling love, romantic love, erotic, sexual love. Because eros is incredibly important to a good, God-honoring marriage ... but it can also be incredibly destructive. It's like the pond of alligators in the middle of every one of our neighborhoods. So we need to give it some attention.

So ... when I perform a wedding, we start down here – groom, dad, bride. And down here the bride and the groom aren't really making promises to each other, they're making promises to God. This is the vertical part of a wedding. I ask them, for God: "Will you love each other, comfort each other, honor and keep each other, in sickness and in health ... (And here's the part we're going to unpack today) and, forsaking all others (giving up all others, renouncing the pursuit of all others, will you) be faithful to each other (how long? ____) so long as you both shall live?" In other words, this is what they are saying: "I promise you, God, I will not give my body to any other person no matter what my heart says to me." Now that's a big promise, that's a hard promise to keep.

And then the couple comes up here and they make the same promise to each other. This is the horizontal part of the ceremony. He says, "I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward." She says the same: "To have and to hold, from this day forward." Guys, at it's most basic, this is about the eros. What do you think it means to "have" someone? They are saying to each other, 'I commit my body only to you, I give my body only to you ... till one of us is dead.' And that was God's plan from the beginning.

Now I'm not really going to preach this morning. I'm going to do a bit of teaching – what does the Bible say about the role of eros in marriage. And then I'm going to reflect for a few minutes on some very practical applications.

So, here's the big idea this morning, and most of what we are going to explore flows out of this big idea. Here it is: This is not my body. I don't own me, and you don't own you. Now that's about as counter-cultural as it gets. You hear it out there all the time out there: "This is my body; you can't tell me what to do with my body." Well, we are Jesus followers. And

we Jesus followers understand that this is not my body. I don't own me, and you don't own you. Do you know who does?

Well, to begin with, God does. Now I know that's not PC, but it's what we believe. Listen to these verses from our Bible:

- The Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him." (Ps 24.1) Now, I'm part of that "everything," and you're one of those "all it's people." Which means, "I don't own me, and you don't own you." We are his first.
- The Bible says (this one is directed to Jesus followers), "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself." (1C 6) I don't own me, and you don't own you. God has first claim.

But for those of us who are married, it gets more complicated. And this part isn't just un-PC, this is flat out anti-PC.

- The Bible says, "The wife does not have authority over her own body (really?!) but (she) yields (authority over her body) it to her husband (now that doesn't sound right!). In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body (really) but (he) yields (authority over his body) it to his wife." Well at least it's reciprocal. So, this body doesn't just belong to God, it's Julie's too. Isn't she lucky? And Julie's body doesn't just belong to God – although it's his first, and because she is his first, she has to be treated with respect – on our wedding day she yielded authority over her body to me too. Huh ... so much for, "It's my body; you can't tell me what to do with it!" Are you with me on this, you Jesus followers? Because if you don't buy this, the rest of this isn't going to make sense. But I'm telling you, this is God's truth.

Well this truth that I don't belong to me and you don't belong to you has some profound implications for marriage. Here's the biggest one: It means that in a God-honoring marriage, sex is more about giving than getting. In fact, that's exactly what the Bible says. Here it is again: "The wife does not have authority over her own body but (she) yields it to her husband. (And) In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife... (Therefore) Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, (therefore, don't hold yourselves back from sex) unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time ..." You

see, if it's my body, and I can do whatever I want with it, then I can deprive my partner whenever I choose. But if it's her body too, and if marriage is more about giving than getting, then it's my responsibility to take care of my partner sexually, and it's your responsibility to take care of your partner sexually. In a God-honoring marriage, you cannot withhold yourself – unless you both agree, for a limited time. And I'm going to try to show you why.

Now, historically, and culturally, there are several different perspectives on sex that just clash. Here are three of the big ones. A lot of people out there look at sex as just one of our natural appetites. We have a natural appetite for food, we have a natural appetite for sleep, we have a natural appetite for sex. When you're hungry, you eat; when you're tired, you sleep; when you are lusty, you take care of it, it's natural. And just like it's natural to sample different foods, it's natural to enjoy different sexual experiences. In fact, if sex is a natural appetite, and you repress it, it's unhealthy, right? By the way, that's a pretty common perspective out there.

Here's another one. Some people out there, and quite a few people in here, have a far more negative view of sex. They see sex as a necessary evil. You see there are two parts to every one of us. There's a physical part – our lower nature; and there's the rational part, the spiritual part – our higher nature. Sex is part of our lower nature. So it's kind of degrading, it's kind of dirty. We do it, but we don't talk about it. Unfortunately a whole lot of Jesus followers kind of go this way. They treat sex like it's a necessary evil.

Did you know that if you went to church during the medieval period and you wanted to follow the teachings of the church, you would be forbidden to have sex 40 days before Christmas, 40 days before and 8 days after Easter, 8 days after Pentecost, on the eves of feast days, on Sundays – to commemorate the resurrection, on Wednesday's – to remember Lent, on Fridays – to celebrate the crucifixion, during pregnancy, 30 days after birth, 40 days if the child is female, during menstruation, and 5 days before communion. That adds up to 252 excluded the days, not counting feast days. They estimate about 30 of those, meaning there were 83 remaining days when a couple could have sex, providing of course the woman was not on her period, pregnant, or in the postnatal period, and providing they

always intended to conceive a child. Sound like the church advocated healthy sexuality? No! That was awful.

And even today, with this terrible naiveté, Some Christian parents try to convince their kids to abstain from pre-marital sex by treating sex as a necessary evil. They are not helping us.

And there's a third perspective on sex out there. Remember, Perspective 1: It's a natural appetite. Perspective 2: It's a necessary evil. Perspective 3: It's a form of self-expression. It's a way to find myself and be myself. It's a way to explore who I am and what I like. If I want to reserve sex for marriage, that's cool – that's my choice. If I want to pursue it outside of marriage, that's cool – that's my choice. If I want to experiment with different kinds of sexuality – if I want to be Caitlyn, not Steve -- that's cool, that's my choice. If I want to explore porn, if I want to move from conquest to conquest, it's a way for me to be me – irrespective of what it does to you. Self-centered twits!

Now all three of these perspectives on sex clash with God's ... and we are Jesus followers. And we try to live God's way whether we understand him or not. And we try to do life God's way whether we agree with him or not. Because ... God owns me. You buy that?

Now, sex is an appetite, planted in us by God – that's true. But here is the thing about appetites: animals are controlled by their appetites, we're not. We're different. We bear God's image. We can choose when and where and how to feed our appetites. And sometimes our choices are just bad. All of us get hungry, but some of us choose to eat too much, and we choose to eat the wrong stuff. You want proof? (look at me) All of us get sleepy, but some of us choose to sleep too little, and some of us choose to sleep too much – we're flat out lazy. You see, God gave us the freedom to choose how to feed our appetites; they don't control us. And all of us have a God-given desire for sex. But all of us can choose when, and where, and how. And listen guys: the choices we make don't just affect our bodies, they affect our hearts, and they affect the people we love. You see, our hearts get all twisted up whenever we pursue sex outside the boundaries of marriage, where God intended it. And people we love always get hurt. We'll get there in a couple minutes.

And how about the idea that sex is a necessary evil, part of our lower nature? Well, that's just crazy. We don't believe the body is evil; we don't believe our God-given appetites are evil. Did you know that Christianity is probably the most body-positive religion in the world? God created our physical world and he called it good – and we agree with him. He created our physical bodies, and he called them good – and we agree with him. God himself took a body – as Jesus. And when Jesus comes back, we believe he's going to give us these brand new bodies – and it will be very good. And guys, all through the Bible God's people understood that sex was a gift, a magnificent gift from our God. It was God's idea, it was God's gift. In fact there is poetry in the Bible that celebrates sex so openly, that we can't read it in church without scandalizing you. Guys, any Jesus follower who thinks sex is bad or dirty – in itself – needs to read the Bible. It's not a book for prudes.

And the idea that sex is a form of self-expression, a way to find myself and be myself, so there really are no rules ... And if you get hurt along the way, well, I've got to be me, and I have a right to be happy. Right! That's so pathetic! And here's the paradox: you won't discover yourself by living for yourself. You'll only discover who you really are -- who God meant you to be -- by living for others, and living for God. The self-absorbed life is a petty one – it's far too little, it's unworthy. You will discover that a life loving God and loving others, a life that focuses on giving not getting – that's the kind of life that satisfies, and that's where you will discover who you really are.

Okay, so let's dig down and see what God wanted for us when he invented sex. What is it supposed to do for us, besides make babies, and to be honest, be great fun? Now the first time sex is mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis chapter 2. Right there at the beginning God creates the woman, and brings her to the man. And it says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united (united) to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Gen 2.24) It's talking about sex. And through this sex, through this uniting, they virtually become one brand new person. The two become one: not just physically, but legally, socially, economically. Sex is part of what binds two people together into one brand new unit.

And here's the deal: sex is both the sign of that union, and the means to accomplish it. Sex makes two one; and sex is a sign that two are one –

more than just physically. You see, God never intended for us to unite with anyone physically unless we are willing to unite with them emotionally, socially, economically, and legally. God never intended for us to get naked with anyone unless we are willing to get naked with them in every other way. And once we give ourselves to someone in marriage, sex is one of God's ways that we maintain that union year after year till death do us part. That was God's plan.

I keep making reference to Timothy Keller's superb book on a God-honoring marriage. We're pulling a lot of the ideas we are teaching in this series from this book. Well, Keller taught me something I really hadn't pondered before. He talks about sex as a covenant renewal ceremony. Sex is a covenant renewal ceremony. A couple weeks ago we talked about agape love, that means covenant love. We said that in marriage we're not just making a promise, we're making a covenant: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. In fact the Bible calls our spouse our "covenant partner."

And all through the Bible there are these covenant renewal ceremonies. They would have these ceremonies to remind themselves who they were and what they stood for – to renew the covenant. That's kind of what the Lord's Supper is to us. It's a covenant renewal ceremony. Each week we remind ourselves who we are and what we stand for. Well, sex is a covenant renewal ceremony. It is the most powerful way any of us give ourselves to another person. It's the way God designed for two people to say to each other, "I belong to you. I belong to you completely, permanently, and exclusively." Listen guys, everything sex means in marriage is cheapened when a person has sex outside of marriage. It becomes so much less than what God made it to be; and it degrades the covenant we made (or will make) with our spouse.

A lot of people pick on the apostle Paul. They think he was anti-sex, which is ... stupid. Paul was not anti-sex; he was anti anything that would cheapen sex. One thing he tells us is that a Jesus follower can't have sex with a prostitute. And it's not because of the STDs, or because he is a prude. He says, "Don't you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say (all the way back there in Genesis 2), 'The two are united into one.'" You see, it is always -- it is always -- more than "just sex." It's the uniting of two into one.

I like the way the Message puts it. It says, “We must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never ‘become one.’” That would cheapen it. And it would degrade covenant love – the only kind of love that lasts. So Paul says, “It’s stupid, it is dishonest, to give your body to someone to whom you don’t intend to give your whole life.”

Now a lot of people out there, and probably some of you in here, think this view of sex is too narrow. “It’s just sex,” right? A lot of people figure that the idea of waiting till marriage is stupid and unrealistic. In fact, a lot of people think that the idea of waiting till marriage is unhealthy. A lot of people think that even in marriage a little bit of fooling around is perfectly fine, maybe even healthy. And yet, their experience, and your experience proves what Paul is trying to tell us.

Listen guys, if God designed sex as a way to unite two persons into one, then it shouldn’t surprise anybody that people feel that incredible sense of union even when they use sex wrong. You’ve seen it happen. You’ve seen it happen on TV; you’ve seen it happen to your friends; you may have even felt it in your own life. Two people have sex outside of marriage, and immediately they start saying things like, “I’ll always love you.” “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” “I’ll never let you go.” And even though they are not married, they start to feel connected. So when he doesn’t call her back the next day, she gets hurt. Because sex was designed by God to create a covenant, and to renew that covenant. So when he wants to break it off, she gets intensely jealous, and even obsessive – she get hurt. Think Fatal Attraction, or Play Misty for Me. And so does the real wife, or the real husband, and the kids – because “the cheater was supposed to be in covenant with me, we gave ourselves to each other in every way.”

And if the sex happens before marriage, the power of sex to make two into one causes a whole lot of people to get trapped in a marriage that isn’t healthy, because their emotions drown out their brains. Once they start having sex, they go brain dead. I’ve done quite a bit of pre-marital counseling, I suppose. Here’s one thing I have seen, a lot. I’ll see two people who are just mismatched; it’s a terrible match. And sometimes I wonder what’s pushing them. And a lot of times, it’s because they have already started the sex. And sex has such power to make two one. In fact

it overrides their brains, and plants this deep sense of obligation. Because that's how God designed sex; and that's why he tells us to reserve it ... for marriage. Because it creates covenant, and it renews covenant.

And when people have sex outside their marriage, it erodes the covenant they have made with their spouse, at the same time it is softening your heart towards another. Because sex creates covenant, and it renews covenant – which is why God designed it for marriage. It is too powerful for us in any other context. Well, I'm going to try to quit teaching and start meddling. I want to talk real straight to two kinds of people sitting in this room.

First, I want to say some things to those of you who are struggling to wait till marriage. It can be really hard, because sex is one of God's most powerful gifts – it's a powerful God-given appetite. Three things:

- Piece 1: You need to develop some fierce convictions. Get clear about what God wants. That can be hard, because we are so good at rationalizing, and compromising. Guys, God created sex for marriage. If you don't understand why – you've got to trust him. He's smarter than we are. And he's not trying to make life hard, he's trying to make life great. And if you don't agree with God on waiting till marriage. That's okay – wait anyway. He's God; you're not. He owns you; you don't.
- Piece 2: The Bible says, "Run from sexual sin." (1C 6.18) Run away; don't walk; run! In fact it is the only sin the Bible tells us to run from. Because it's so powerful; it's so seductive; and it has such power to spoil what God wants for you. If you are tempted to sin every time you are in his room alone together; don't be in his room alone together. It's not smart to put yourself in a place where you know you're going to struggle. Don't put yourself in a place where you are going to struggle and then ask God to give you the strength to resist sin. That's stupid. Run from sexual sin.
- Piece 3: If you stumble and fall, don't be cripples by your failures. Having sex before marriage or outside of marriage is not the unpardonable sin. Don't let your guilt and your shame drive you away from the grace of God. God doesn't take sin lightly – he died for it. But neither does he want us to wallow in our shame and guilt. Accept his grace. If you don't, you're just going to make it harder the next time you're tempted.

And now for those of us who are married.

- Piece 1: Remember, you don't own you. God owns you first; and you gave yourself to your husband or your wife when you were married. Remember: "The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife." (1C 6.4)
- Piece 2: Because of that, we don't withhold sex from each other, in marriage. It's not just about me; what I want, what I need. Remember what it goes on to say? "Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it ... but only for a short time. Then come back together again." (1C 6.5)
- Piece 3: For how long? For how many years do we pursue sex in our marriages? Guys, as long as you are in covenant, covenant renewal is appropriate. As long as you have the ability, and as long as your partner has the desire – we serve each other, we renew our covenant ... till death do us part.
- Piece 4: The sex will change. I was listening to one Christian comedian who was talking about sex after 50. He says, "Having intimacy after 50 is like playing basketball. I have to stretch first, no fast moves or I'll pull a muscle, and when I'm finished I have to soak in some ice so the swelling will go down." That's fine – we are different as we grow older; our bodies are different. Time, children, ailments, age – they all force changes to our sexual intimacy. But as long as you have the ability, and as long as your partner has the desire, you'll figure something out – till death do you part.

PRAYER