

“Till Death Do Us Part”

Sermon 2: “Will you love and honor ...”

May 17, 2015

You hear these kind of lines all over the place. Some of them are pretty funny:

- Here’s Jeff Foxworthy: “Getting married for sex is like buying a 747 for the free peanuts.”
- Groucho Marx: “I was married by a judge. I should have asked for a jury.”
- Rodney Dangerfield: “My wife and I were happy for 20 years. Then we met.”
- Minnie Pearl: “Getting married is a lot like getting into a tub of hot water. After you get used to it, it ain’t so hot.”
- Lewis Grizzard: “I came from a big family. In fact, I never got to sleep alone until I got married.”
- Henny Youngman: “Do you know what it means to come home at night to a woman who’ll give you a little love, a little affection, a little tenderness? It means you’re in the wrong house.”
- Rita Rudner: “I love being married. It’s so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life.”
- Katherine Hepburn: “If you want to sacrifice the admiration of many men for the criticism of one, go ahead, get married.”

Here are a few from some of the movies you may have seen recently:

- “Husbands are like wine, they take a long time to mature.” (Letters to Juliet)
- “We were perfectly happy until we decided to live happily ever after.” (Sex and the City)
- “Marriage is the Jack Kevorkian of romance.” (The Story of Us)
- “Marriages don’t work when one partner is happy and the other is miserable. Marriage is about both people being equally miserable.” (Forget Paris)
- “We both said, ‘I do,’ and we haven’t agreed on a single thing since.” (So I Married an Axe Murderer)
- “Life after death is as improbable as sex after marriage.” (Clue)
- A man doesn’t know what happiness is until he’s married. By then it’s too late.” (The Joker is Wild)

- “Marriage is punishment for shoplifting in some countries.” (Wayne’s World)

Now they are pretty funny, but they paint a rather pathetic picture of marriage, don’t they? Makes you want to jump right in! Truth is, marriage is taking a real beating in our culture. Now I like the jokes – they are funny. But for a lot of people these aren’t just jokes. So, we’re doing a study on marriage for the next month or so. And I need to start off with three caveats.

- Caveat #1: This study is not just for the married folk in the room. It’s also for those who aren’t married yet. And it’s also for those who used to be married, and may again be some day. And it’s even for those who have no interest in ever getting married – since you probably hang out with those who are married, and they may need your help. So if you are not married right now, you still need to listen in.
- Caveat #2: Doing a study on marriage is really hard for those whose marriages are struggling, or broken. And that includes quite a few of you. I’m going to say some things that are hard, and they’ll probably hurt. Well here’s what we’re about: We’re about God’s truth, and God’s grace. We’ll never lower the bar. We’ll try to be straight about what God’s wants to see in our marriages. But all of us – all of us – mess up a lot. And if you are struggling, he still loves you, and he still wants the best for you ... We do too. Truth, and grace.
- Caveat #3: Some of you guys aren’t Jesus followers, yet. So some of what we’re going to say is going to sound weird to you. That’s all right. We think this stuff is right, and we think God’s way works better – even for those who aren’t sure about him yet. So, listen in, and if you want to give some of this a try, that’s cool.

Truth is, guys, marriage is taking a real beating in our culture. Now I’m going to give you some numbers this morning. And I’m not going to give you any footnotes. But if you want to dig deeper into where I got these numbers, there is a great book on marriage that came out 2 years ago. Tim Keller is flat out good. And the stats I’ll give you this morning are from this book. Well, according to the “leading marriage indicators,” marriage in America has been in decline for the last 40 or 50 years.

- The divorce rate is nearly twice as high today as it was in 1960.

- In 1970, 89% of births were to married parents; today, that has dropped to 60%.
- In 1960 72% of American adults were married (about 3/4); 2008, 50% (about 1/2).

That's a sharp decline, and I could show you more numbers – but you get the idea... Because ... we have bought into the notion that marriage is not a safe route to happiness. And because we are obsessed with being happy, marriage is taking some hits. Here's a big number. A whole lot of people are just living together without marriage. In fact, today more than half of all people live together before marriage. One study found that over 60% of our unmarried ladies will have lived with some guy before they reach the age of 40. 50 years ago that was almost unheard of.

But you know what's happening. Most people believe most marriages are unhappy. 50% end in divorce. A whole lot of those that stay together are miserable. So they reason... "Let's live together and see if we can be happy" ... right? "Let's test it out and see if we're compatible first. Let's see if we've got the chemistry to make it work. We'll kick the tires a bit before we buy the car." That's smart, isn't it?" Well ... No! That's fantasy, that's myth. Did you know that there is a mountain of evidence that if you live together before marriage, you are even more likely to break apart after marriage? The cure is worse than the disease!

And the truth is – this is truth, not fantasy – despite what they're telling you, most married people aren't miserable. In fact, all surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are very happy – not just happy, but very happy – in their marriages is actually quite high: 61-62%. And that number is holding steady. And here's what is even more mind blowing and myth busting: did you know that studies tell us that 2/3 of the unhappy marriages out there (and in here) will become happy within 5 years if you stay married and don't divorce. So ... (1) most people are actually happy in their marriages; and (2) if they are not, if they stick it out, they will probably eventually become happy; and (3) this one is overwhelming – kids who grow up in married, two-parent families have 2-3 times more positive life outcomes than those who do not. It is incredible! Your kids need you married.

But despite the data, despite the facts, marriage is under attack, it's taking a beating in our culture. And I'd like to try to show you what happened. This may sound to some of you like the rantings of an old man about the good old days; but if you've been around here for a while, you know I have no interest in the good old days. What does interest me are ideas: reality and myth; God's ideas, and the stupid ideas we put in their place.

At one time the importance, and the goodness of marriage was a universal. It was a no-brainer. Today, not so much. One national marriage project found that only about 1/3 of our high school seniors believe that marriage is more beneficial to people than the alternatives. That's incredible! Even though the facts don't support that myth! But the myth has taken root because there has been a shift in our culture's understanding of the purpose of marriage. What we want out of marriage, what we expect out of marriage has changed – and it is destroying our marriages!

Here's what it used to be. I'm going to give it to you in lawyer, then I'll put it in English. The ideal of marriage used to be “a permanent contractual union designed for the sake of mutual love, procreation, and protection.” In other words, it was for life, for love, for kids, and for security. But that has changed. The new ideal of marriage is “a terminal sexual contract designed for the gratification of the individual parties.” In other words, it is a temporary contract for good sex and my happiness. And when the sex is no longer good, and it's not making me happy, I can move on. In other words, once marriage was about us; now it's about me. Once it was about giving the love they need; now it's about getting the love I need – it's about my emotional fulfillment, my sexual fulfillment, my self-actualization. You buy that? That we have become so unbelievably self-centered?

And here's the deal (this is important, this is huge): once a marriage becomes about me – it can't work. It's no wonder marriage is under attack. What people want out of marriage has changed, and marriage can't give people what they want from it. So here's a column in the NY Times: “The Happy Marriage is the Me Marriage.” She says, “Isn't marriage supposed to be about putting the relationship first? Not anymore...” You see, it used to be for our mutual good; now it's for what I need, for what I want. It used to be about us; now it's about me. And a marriage built on that ideal can not work!

But we try to make it work. Here's how. Here's our strategy now. We desperately search for a perfectly compatible soul-mate. Just a clue: there aren't any. But we're out looking for him, or her. And there are two requirements for a perfect soul-mate. (1) They have to be pleasing to the eye, and pleasing to the body. Are they hot and can they pleasure me? That's one. The second requirement is even more important. (2) Will they accept me as I am and not try to change me? You see, if you are truly compatible, you won't have to change, right? Guys: that's the myth; here's the real. Physical attractiveness and sexual chemistry will come and go – for all of us. And everyone one of us changes; and every one of us needs to change.

Guys, this poppycock is killing us. It has not only contaminated our ideal of marriage, it has even infected our ideal of manhood. We used to understand that one of the purposes of marriage was to grow us up, to mature us, to help us live for something bigger than ourselves – to change us. And that's no longer a goal. We don't want to grow up, we don't want to mature, we don't want to live for anything bigger than ourselves. We used to think that the most valued marker of maturity was self-mastery. Anyone who indulged in excess -- excessive eating, or excessive drinking, or excessive sleeping, or excessive sex – they had some growing up to do. Now we revel in excess, and we we're looking for someone who will support us in that quest – our soul-mate, who will never change us.

So we pursue a myth. We want a marriage where we will receive emotional and sexual satisfaction from someone who will let us be ourselves. Someone who is fun, intellectually stimulating, sexually attractive, and on top of it all, supportive of my goals and the way I want to live. We want someone low maintenance, who doesn't want to change me. We want ... a myth.

It's weird, isn't it, that our new ideal for marriage has damned marriage for most people? You see, in the past it was way more about learning to become the best partner we could be; today it's about finding the perfect person – that perfect soul-mate babe. So we look past those who are "good enough," and we quit on those who falter... And we all will, falter. You see, this Me-Marriage requires two nearly perfect people with few character flaws. And they are a myth. You're not going to find one to

marry you, and no one is going to find it in you. One guy says, We obsess over our partner's flaws, because we are determined to get more than we deserve, because we are determined to reject anyone remotely like ourselves... We have forgotten that marriage is a partnership between two flawed people determined to create a place of stability and love and consolation in a broken, hard world.

Guys, our culture tells us to pursue a myth. But our God doesn't deal in myth. Culture says, keep looking for your soul-mate, even if you have to discard the one you promised yourself to. The reality is this: You never marry the right person. I'm serious. You never marry the "right" person. You ever think, "Marriage shouldn't be this hard"? "If only I had married the right person, it wouldn't be this hard"? Are you serious? We actually think that building a great marriage should be easy. That's stupid! We tell ourselves, "If two people are really soul-mates, if they are truly compatible, it should just come naturally, right?" ... Actually ... no!

Listen guys, one excellent Christian teacher put it like this: "No two people are compatible." He says, We think there is someone just right for us, and we've got to find that person. He says, we fail to understand that we always marry the wrong person ... always. That's reality, guys: We never really know the person we marry; we just think we do. And even if we happen to marry a person who is nearly perfect for us at that moment—they are going to change. We all do. None of us stays the same. He says, the biggest challenge we have in marriage (this is huge) is "learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you promised yourself." Marriage is about learning to love a stranger, over and over and over again.

Wow! That's different. But that's reality. Because God doesn't deal in myth. Here's reality guys: You are broken – you are broken -- you are no one's perfect soul-mate. And they are broken – everyone out there -- no one is your perfect soul-mate. We call it sin. Every one of us is a sinner: we sin against God, we sin against each other. We're really good at it. We are self-centered, we are neurotic, we are immature. Listen guys, the doctrine of sin explains why marriage – any marriage – is so hard.

And here's what's ironic. Even if you happen to catch a person at their very best, they are going to change. Guys, if they are not changing, they

are dead. Even if you happen to marry the perfect person, they are going to change, as you can't know who they are going to be until you get there. And your spouse doesn't know who you are going to be until you get there. Julie didn't expect this when she married me! Which is why marriage is about learning to love a broken stranger, over, and over, and over again. That's the kind of love you want, and that's the kind of love your partner needs. To make a marriage work, to build the kind of marriage you need, you are going to have to learn to love a person you didn't marry. You'll have to make changes you don't want to make. And so will your ... mate. And maybe some day your journey will take you to that strong, and tender, and joyful marriage you dream of. But it will not be because you found that perfect soul-mate. That person doesn't exist.

There is one more cultural shift that has been degrading our marriages. Here's how it was once: Once we expected marriage and family to provide love, and support, and security. That's cool. But we went to God for meaning and purpose, for hope, for moral values, and for our self-identity. Because he can give us those things. But we are pushing God away, and now a whole lot of people are looking for marriage to give us what only God can give. We look to our partner to give us meaning, and hope. They can't. We look for our partner to help give us identity. They can't. In other words, we give our partner God's place... And they can't handle it! No person can heal you; no person can make you whole; no person can bear God's place as the center of your life. No person can give you what only God can give.

So ... marriages are struggling. In fact, some people think the whole institution of marriage is dying. Well, how could it not be sick when it is being driven by such myths? So what do we do? Do we simply admit that marriage is quaint and unenlightened and ineffective? Or do we go back – not to our past (I don't care about our past), but to the owner's manual? You see, I'm not interested in the way it used to be; I want to know the way God wants it to be.

So here's what we believe about the way God wants it to be. We believe that marriage is God's idea, and he created it for our good. Right back in Genesis 2 God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone, so I will make him a wife." (Genesis 2.18) And when the man saw the wife God created for him he is dazzled (of course, she is naked). And it says, "That is why a

man leaves his father and mother and is united, he is joined, to his wife – and they become one flesh.” (Gen 2.24) They are married. Marriage is God’s idea. It was God’s plan from the beginning. And God’s ideas are always better than ours.

And if marriage is God’s idea, it makes sense that it works when it’s done his way. Think about it, if you buy a car, you probably consult the owner’s manual when there is trouble. If you purchase electronics, you probably consult the owner’s manual – especially when it starts messing up. Guys, marriages are way more complex than cars or computers. If you want to make it work, you’ve got to consult the owner’s manual, you’ve got to work it the way it was designed to work. Does that make sense?

Some of you guys are thinking, “Well, no. It really doesn’t make sense. Why consult an ancient book to give answers to modern problems with sex, and love, and marriage. The Bible seems quaint, it seems regressive, it seems rather prudish, doesn’t it?” Well, the way we’re doing it isn’t working. Maybe it’s worth a shot trying it God’s way.

Now, we’re going to be working our way through the marriage vows, kind of. These are promises most of us have made. In fact, they are probably the most common of all the vows we make, and probably the most broken of all the vows we make. But the vows draw on God’s ideas for marriage. And here’s the question the pastor asks the groom at the beginning of a wedding: “Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her ...” And he answers, “I will,” I hope. “I will love her – I promise.” And then the pastor asks the bride the same question: “Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him ...” And she answers, “I will,” I hope. “I will love him – I promise.”

Guys, that’s right out of the owner’s manual. One of the most famous passages on marriage in the Bible ends like this: “So ... each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect (must honor) her husband.” (Eph 5.33) So at the beginning of a marriage ceremony we make a vow to do it God’s way, we promise to obey God’s command. Because it is a command isn’t it? Each man “must” love his wife; each woman “must” honor her husband. Guys, it doesn’t matter whether she’s lovable or not. We made a promise, to her, and to God. Ladies, it doesn’t

matter whether we guys always deserve your honor or not. You made a promise, to your guy, and to your God.

And the reason it's a command is that God knows it's going to be hard. There are times when you're not going to want to love that flawed, broken woman you find yourself married to. There are times when you're not going to want to honor that flawed, broken man you find yourself married to. But you can. You can choose to love, when you don't want to; you can choose to honor when you don't want to. Did you know that?

The Bible chooses the word for love so carefully. Did you know that there are a lot of different words for "love" in Greek. They could have chosen the word for brotherly love. They didn't. They could have chosen the word for sensual love. They didn't. They could have chosen the word for motherly love. They didn't. They chose a word that wasn't used all that much – except by Christians – a word that pointed to a different kind of love. God says, "agape each other." Agape your wives. Agape your husbands.

This is a different kind of love. It's not self-centered, it's selfless. It's not conditional, it's unconditional. It's not based on what we feel, it's a choice we make. Guys, God doesn't love us only when we deserve it. God doesn't love us only when we are loveable, or lovely, or loving. God doesn't quit loving us when we disappoint him. He loves us with agape – a selfless, unconditional, sacrificial love. God doesn't tell us to love our spouse only when they deserve it. He doesn't tell us to love them only when they are loveable, or lovely, or loving. He doesn't tell us we can quit when they disappoint us, deeply enough. He tells us to love each other with the same kind of love he gives us.

And that's hard. But with his help – you can. I was down in Atlanta last week for a conference. Jon was there, Tater, Chris Dove, Randy – my preaching partner. One of the things we heard really challenged me. They were talking about leadership. And they suggested that we ask this question when we're in a spot: "What would a great leader do?" How would a great pastor respond to that criticism? What would a great student pastor do for that struggling kid? How would a great executive pastor deal with the tensions between those two staff members?

I think that question works for husbands and wives, who are trying to love and honor each other God's way. In fact, it may take you right to the heart of God's kind of love. What would a great husband do when a wife is hurting? You do that. What would a great wife do when her husband messes up? You do that. What would a great husband or a great wife do when they hurt you, when they fail you, when they neglect you, when they struggle at work, when they are inattentive to the kids? You do that. That agape love isn't something you feel; it's something you choose. And when you keep choosing to love ... you have a chance at building a great, God-honoring marriage.

Just love each other the way you want God to love you. Just love each other the way Jesus loved you. To the LS ...

FINAL CHALLENGE

Stop obsessing over your partner's weaknesses

Worrying that they you may not find your perfect soul mate (you didn't)

Start obsessing over giving God his rightful place

And promising to let him morph you into the person you can be

What would a great husband do?

Guys: vow to God ...

What would a great wife do?

Ladies: vow to God ...