

Making Love Last a Lifetime

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

July 3, 2005

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An eight week sermon series is long. That is especially true when it is interspersed with four guest speakers, and thus stretches over a 12-week time period. If you don't like the subject matter, this requires a lot of patience and tolerance. If I'm describing you, consider yourself commended. You stand in the path of Job who endured his "spiritual" friends.

When I planned this series and found it would end on the 4th of July weekend, I thought, "How inappropriate!" However, as I delved into God's Word, I became convinced that this is the work of God's Spirit. Every nation was formed in God's love. Every human needs love that lasts a lifetime, and we are created to express that. Even more, love that is expressed in marriages makes God's Top Ten List of community concerns. The seventh of the Ten Commandments directly addresses marital love. Even as the key to student achievement is homework, the key to national health is also homework! Both history and the Bible reveal this. Accordingly, the New Testament calls for the entire congregation to invest in the marriages and home life of believers. Indeed, God designed marriage for the creation and blessing of humanity. When it works well, individuals, families, and even nations flourish. However, all of us stagger and stumble from love poisoned with sin. Marriage gives us an opportunity, through the redemption of Christ, to demonstrate God's love in the most intimate way to another human being. Marriage is a divine mission. There is great fulfillment in it, and many singles seek this.

However, *the single life* is also a gift. People are not married because of God's special favor. Singles are equally important and loved. The Bible warns singles not to make getting married too high of a priority. The Apostle Paul wrote:

Now I say to those who aren't married and to widows — it's better to stay unmarried... I want you to be free from the concerns of this life. An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please him. But a married man can't do that so well. He has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. His interests are divided. In the same way, a woman who is no longer married or has never been married can be more devoted to the Lord in body and in spirit, while the married woman must be concerned about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-34, NLT)

One of my closest friends was widowed. God led him to remarry some years later. During those single years, however, he became so intimate with God and made such an impact on hundreds of lives. His singleness, painful at first, became one of the greatest gifts he and our community ever experienced.

God has tremendous grace and love for those who never marry; and his timing is impeccable for those who put the issue in his hands. If you are in that category, talk to God and trust him. Your heavenly Father is trustworthy.

God's love is no less for those who are widowed or divorced. The Scriptures tell us in Deuteronomy 10 and Psalm 68 that God passionately protects and avenges widows; and for those divorced, we learn in Psalm 27 that even if parents abandon them, God won't. All are the focus of love from eternity to eternity. You have been loved and planned for trillions upon trillions of years, and that love won't stop no matter how many billions and trillions of years are ahead. You can't affect God's love for you, but you can decide whether you will embrace it.

When God does bring us together in Christian marriage, we have *a shared sense of meaning*. We are responding to a divine call. We begin to express to the world the love that

Christ has for us his bride. There is an impact we can make together that can be made in no other way. Indeed, as we faithfully live out our calling we become instruments by which God maximizes the potential of our mate. No marriage is even close to what it can be until the love and mercy of Christ fills the hearts and vision of the mates. If Christ is the bread of life, then he is also the bread of married life.

That is why it is important for you singles to be careful about who you date. In dating we share our hearts, and if one is given to Christ and one isn't, we can be quickly drawn into a relationship that the Bible calls in 2 Corinthians 6:14 "unequally yoked." A tension, distance and incongruence will exist at the deepest point of your relationship and will result, at minimum, in a deep sadness.

Tasting and seeing some implications, some New Testament believers wondered about their marriages. Paul wrote:

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1 Corinthians 7:12-14, NIV)

As difficult as that passage is to understand, believing spouses have tremendous influence. Indeed, light is greater than darkness. Although most conversions occur in childhood or adolescence, the greatest percentage of adult conversions results from the ministry of a spouse. If you are a Christian and your spouse is of another religion or is spiritually AWOL, absent-without-leave, and he or she wants to stay married, such love works in his or her favor.

I've often quoted some very negative statistics, especially to challenge lax fathers about their spiritual impact. Do you remember the survey? When both parents worship, some 80

percent of their children attend as adults. When just the father attends, around 70 percent of the children continue as adults. When just the mother attends, the figure drops to around 30 percent. I had not thought about how hopeless that makes some believing mothers feel. Truthfully, they need not feel hopeless at all. The Bible assures us that the results can be very different.

Therefore, believing mates need to trust God and not pressure or badger their spouses. Such actions sinfully violate human dignity. Do not run down your spouse in front of your children. Tenderly love, respect and affirm your spouse. Non-Christian marital partners should feel safe and served by their believing mates. Children should taste the sweetness of divine love from their believing parent. Yet those believing mates can quietly pray for all the needs of their spouses, and they can openly and respectfully share the loves and longings of their hearts when asked by spouse or child. Otherwise, they are not fostering honest and loving relationships in their home. Think of the influence a personal trainer can have on a person's values and lifestyle. Think of how the birth of a child changes us. God's Spirit invited by a believing mate has even greater influence.

In truth, marriages grow as we live our call to discipleship. We experience the truth of Ecclesiastes 4. Better results come with partnership, and our recovery from injury is quicker. We find greater endurance and become stronger people. Dr. Steve Lansing is a marriage specialist and counselor here in Rochester. He says that the divorce rate in our county is a little over 50 percent, but that there are couples that are divorcing at a rate of only one in four hundred (or a quarter of one percent). When he shared the four things in common – worship, prayer, Bible study and annual marriage education, it was obvious. We all, singles and married, are designed to live and grow in a community where you're encouraged and held accountable in a life of Christian discipleship. May you experience and live that here in this family!