

“Staying in Love—The Big Question...”

A young man (boy number one) meets a young woman. She’s in school to become an x-ray technician. He’s getting a degree to teach music. They way they met was kind of serendipitous. A group date. Nice conversation. Laughter. Not much more contact for a while. Neither of them is looking to get serious but there’s an attraction there. A few weeks later she goes on a date with somebody else in the big city (boy number two). There’s a snow storm. He’s afraid to take her back home. She’s ticked off and gets to a bus station and takes a bus back home.

She calls boy number 1 to pick her up at the bus stop. He does. He’s her knight in shining armor. They date. They fall madly in love. On a hot day in August they get married. They’re 21 and have their whole lives ahead of them. Their careers solidify. Baby number one comes along a couple years later. Baby number two comes along three years after that.

There are a couple of job changes early in the marriage that require moving to new cities. Exciting challenges. Raising two boys. Getting involved in the community, a church home, getting those boys through grade school and high school was a challenge. Tons of great times. Family vacations. Camping trips. Birthday parties. Holidays. Wonderful stuff.

And hard times too. Going through the death of parents together. Going through illnesses, recessions, job changes and challenges. Putting their two boys through college. Seeing those boys get married off (being glad they’re not daughters—that can be expensive!). Having grandchildren. And after all that, good times and bad, after 35 years of marriage, they end up divorcing.

That’s a true story. That’s my parents’ story. And that’s the story of some of my friends, so many people I know and love, and respect. We’ve all heard similar stories and it makes us ask the question: What is marriage really all about? What in all relationships, makes them strong whether you are married, single, divorced, never plan on being married? So many relationships and marriages fail because we’re not prepared or equipped or skilled in making them work. When we enter into relationships we often set ourselves up with unrealistic expectations that end up hurting us and our relationships in the long run.

The stats on marriage haven’t changed much. On any given day in almost every county in America there is one divorce filed for every marriage? Some sociologists tell us that only one in four married couples say they’re extremely happy. 3 out of four say they’re just moderately happy to extremely unhappy.

So, do people ever stay together for good, and stay in love? **Is it possible for two people to stay happy together forever?** Is it unrealistic to even think it’s possible? Should we even set our minds on finding somebody we can be and stay in love with forever? Is it even possible?

I think for most of us, at some point in our lives, we ask that question. And it’s a fascinating question because in spite of what you’ve seen, in spite of your current relationship, in spite of what you experienced in your previous marriage, in spite of what you saw with your parents’ marriage, in spite of what you see in the culture around you, in spite of the divorce rate, in spite of everything that would make us think that it’s impossible, there’s something in you, and in me, that would still say, “Yes, it’s possible! It’s possible for two people to stay happy together forever.”

And not only do we think it’s possible, we think it’s possible for us. We think that it’s possible that in spite of the bad things we’ve seen, we have a glimmer of hope. We think, “You bet, maybe someday, some way, I’m going to meet somebody and we’re going to fall in love and we’re going stay in love to the end. On our last date, we’ll be using our walkers, going to the dining hall at the nursing home, but baby we’re sitting next to each other, and we’re holding hands (they may be shaking, but we’re holding hands). And people are going to look at us and they’ll go, ‘Wow! Look how old they are and they’re still in love.’”

So, I believe that at some level, we all answer the question, “Can two people fall and love and stay in love forever?” the same way. At some level we say, “Yes, it’s possible. But I don’t know if it’s probable. I think it’s possible and it’s even possible for me, but will it happen? I hope so, but I don’t know.”

Now we need to spend about 10 seconds talking about **falling in love**. And that's about all it requires is 10 seconds. Because the only requirement for falling in love is a pulse, right? I mean if you have a pulse, you can fall in love.

And it has never been easier to fall in love. It's never been easier to connect with a large number of people because of social networking and online match-making. It's never been easier to fall in love. But it's never been more difficult to stay in love, but that's what we want. We don't want to just be in a relationship. We don't want to just survive the years. We want to be and stay in love.

Why is that so hard? There are lots of reasons what it's never been harder to stay in love. But probably the biggest is that there are so few role models of good marriages that stand the test of time. For over half of us, we didn't see it growing up. We don't see it in the marriages around us. Very few people have even seen the elusive marriage that stays together. Instead, what's modeled for us is relationships that don't go the distance. That's what we see. That's what we're bombarded with. And even when you see people who stay together, you assume they're not in love—and that's not what you want.

Another thing that makes it hard to find a relationship where we stay in love is what we felt growing up. A bunch of smart people got together and came up with a list of what it takes for a child to grow up truly health-mentally, emotionally, relationally, all that. They came up with a list of what it takes to be ready to move into adolescence and engage in healthy, long-term, relationships in the future. Here's what it takes. Large doses of: **Respect, encouragement, comfort, security, support, acceptance, approval, appreciation, attention and affection**. Sound like the family you grew up in?

So if that's what it takes over a long period of time to equip us to engage in long term relationships as an adult, what are the odds of us being able to maintain a forever-after kind of relationship? Especially when we connect with other people who grew up and didn't get all that either.

So what ends up happening for most of us is we come into adulthood looking for somebody who will give us respect, encouragement, comfort, security, support, acceptance, approval, appreciation, attention and affection. So I fall in love with you and now that we're both in love I'm wondering, "Are you going to give me respect, encouragement, comfort, security, support, acceptance, approval, appreciation, attention and affection, or are you just cute? Or do you just have a good job."

Because once we're in love with each other, what started as a hug around the neck becomes a strangle hold. "Give me respect, encouragement, comfort, security, support, acceptance, approval, appreciation, attention and affection. I've got to have it! I've been malnourished from all that and I'm going to squeeze it out of you and you're going to squeeze it out of me and I just wonder why I don't think you're so cute anymore." So we're equipped to fall in love, we're just not so equipped to stay in love.

Then there's another thing that trips us up when it comes to staying in love. And you know this, it's nothing new, but our culture has a really low pain threshold when it comes to relationships. That means it doesn't have to hurt very bad and we decide to get out. Gone are the days when we said "I do means I do and I'm going to keep doing whether things are good, bad or indifferent. We doed and that's what we do." That day is gone. We now have a very low threshold of pain before we throw in the towel.

And the message we get from our culture every single day is that if you're not happy in your current relationship it's because you're with the wrong person. You chose poorly, so you need to re-choose, you need to start over. That's the message of our culture. If you just keep looking you'll find that soul-mate. Just move from relationship to relationship and eventually you'll find the right person.

It's easy to fall in love...it is hard to stay in love. That's swimming against the tide. And we're all bruised about this—our parents, our ex's, our kids are going through this. But here's the good news. Into all this chaos, Jesus speaks. 2,000 years ago Jesus gives us the foundation for staying in love, for relationships that will last. He gives the foundation for love--in love, can't wait to get home, love it when I hear the garage door go up kind of relationships. But it's so counter-intuitive, so not a part of the way we normally think. It's a paradigm shift. And it's so simple that when we hear we say, "Yeah, whatever, give me something deeper. It

can't be that simple. Aaron, I've got her here today, this is your big chance. She didn't want to come, but she's here, give her the good stuff." But it's so simple, and so accessible, and available. If two people will simply accept this basic teaching of Jesus. Are you ready?

This is in John 13:34 **"A new command I give you: Love one another" (John 13:34)**. Jesus is saying to his disciples, "You've got 10 commandments and 700 other rules and laws, but I'm giving you this new one." The word "new" here can mean something that was hidden and then rediscovered. It can mean remarkable. This new command is "Love one another." And the disciples looked at each other and said, "Is that it? That's all you got?"

We're the same way, but don't miss this. He doesn't use love as a noun here, like we do most of the time. We fall into it and out of it like a highchair. But Jesus said, "I'm making it a verb. I want you to love one another." Which means that Jesus would not have been a very good relationship counselor because you would have gone to him and said, "She does this, and she does that, and she never does this over here." Jesus would look at you and say, "Well, are you loving her?" "Well I used to." He's like, "No, no, no. I'm talking verb here, present tense. Not used to. So here's what I want you to do. I want you to go home and love each other." "But we don't feel love for each other." Jesus is like, "You're confusing the noun and the verb. You're saying that you're not feeling the love. You've got to live out love and then you feel it."

This is really important because if we base our relationships on feeling love, like we do when they all start, and that loving feeling starts to fade, when it does that we go looking for somebody else, somebody new, that will bring that feeling back. Jesus is saying, "If you want to maintain it, if you want to grow it, then you need to quit treating love like a noun and start treating it like a verb. So I want you to go home and love one another."

Here's the bottom line—remember this is the just the beginning of this series—but here's the bottom line: The foundation for staying in love is to make love (pause) a verb. The foundation for long term staying in love is making love a verb. In fact I want to tell you something that can't leave this room, OK. The more you make love a verb, the more you make love. But you didn't hear that from me.

So Jesus tells us to make love a verb. It's a command. But he doesn't stop there. And maybe this is the new part of the command. **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34)**. In other words he's saying, "I don't want you to take your cue from culture. I don't necessarily want you to take your cue from your parents about what it means to love one another." He's saying, "When you take your cue about what it means to love like a verb, I want you to take your cue from me. And if you'll let me, I'll teach you how to love."

Later the apostle Paul comes along and takes this same idea and says it in a different way. Except he uses a bad word—a word we don't like. He uses a word that's gotten Christians in a lot of unnecessary trouble. He uses the same concept Jesus did but the word he uses is a word that gets a reaction from us.

The apostle Paul says it this way, **"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21)**. Submit. Do you know what that means? It's the same as "love one another" except it's got a barb on it. Paul goes on to talk directly about marriage and he's saying, "The bottom line for people who are going to stay in love is mutual submission." Mutual submission means that in our relationship you look at your spouse and say, "You are the priority." Your spouse looks at you and says, "No. No. YOU are the priority." I'm saying you take priority and you're saying I do, that's mutual submission. And this kind of submission isn't about one person dominating another. It's a choice you make.

I don't know if you've ever seen that in a marriage, or between people in love, but listen, when you see it, it's powerful. It's rare and it's a little scary because somebody has to go first and say, "Even if you don't make me the priority I'm going to make you the priority." When two people get that going on, listen, love is alive and well in that relationship. And when you see it in a relationship you go, "THAT is what I want." Paul's like, "You want to know what Jesus meant by love one another? He meant mutual submission." That becomes the foundation for staying in love. Not simply staying married; staying in love.

One of the greatest things that pastors get to see is life transformation. One of the greatest things for me having been here 15 years is when a man comes out of a dysfunctional family, and a woman comes out of dysfunctional family, and they become followers of Jesus. They each say, "Jesus, I want what you want for me more than I want what I want for me." And they learn to accept and adopt Jesus' way of thinking about love, and about forgiveness, and grace. They experience this shift in what it means to love and be loved. And all that stuff on that list that they didn't get from Mom and Dad, they begin to find those things in God. God accepts them, God has compassion for them, God gives them security...and they begin to change on the inside. These two people meet with all this junk in their background, but with a completely different view of relationships than what they witnessed growing up and they get married. And the marriage in no way reflects the baggage of what you'd expect to see.

You say, "Wow, how did that happen? The odds were against you! Your background is against you. Your culture is against you. But you've got it." They say, "We've learned to love each other, but not the way we saw it modeled. We learned to love each other the way we understand that God, through Christ loves us. And even though the odds were against us, we're taking our cue from Jesus who gave his love, his away. We take our submission cues to one another, from Jesus who gave it all up for others. We're not just married, we're not just together, we're genuinely in love."

Is it possible for two people to fall in love and stay in love forever? Absolutely! But it doesn't happen because you fell in love in a big powerful way in the early part of the relationship. You stay in love by making love a verb. By loving one another and taking your cue about what that looks like from Jesus. You chose every single day to love that person. You make love a verb. And that looks like mutual submission. You first. No, you first. No, you first..."

And that's a lot different than, "I need you baby! And you got what I want, baby! And you got what I need, baby! And I can't live without you, baby!" All that's good for songs and movies. Falling in love is easy. All you have to do is have a pulse. Staying in love is the hard part, but yes, it is possible.

And when you do that, that thing that's so wonderful about meeting and falling in love, can be sustained. In fact, it can even get better. I'd marry Janet all over again. And I get some serious points for saying that right? But I mean it. I mean it.

Next week we're going to get real specific and look at what does mutual submission mean. What does it mean to live out this love one another thing? If you're married, this will make your marriage stronger. If you're single and want to be married someday, you'll be prepared. If you've gone through relational trauma, this will bring some healing. If you never plan on getting married, this will help you to support your friends that do.

So next week we'll continue this discussion and hopefully we'll all be better equipped to not only fall in love, but to stay in love. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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