

“Staying in Love—Feeling It.”

We're in part 3 of this message series called “Staying in Love.” As we get started today I want to point out a little mystery for those of you who have been in love, or want to be in love, or are in love. The mystery is this: How is it that two people can stand at an altar and swear on their lives that they're going to love each other forever and ever and ever. And that they're going to be the only one of the one and only, this is the final deal, 'til death do us part. And then five years, ten years later, they hate each other. In fact they hate each other more than they hate any other individual on the planet. That's just weird isn't it?! That the person that they gave their deepest vow to, is now the person they despise the most. We'll try to figure that out today.

The Big Question for this whole series has been: **Is it possible for two people to fall in love and stay in love forever?** And even if I told you, “No, it's not possible for two people to fall in love and stay in love forever.” Even if I told you it's not possible, you would try it anyway. Even if I tried to prove to you that it's not possible for two people to fall in love and stay in love forever, in your heart, and mine too, we think it is possible and we think we're all candidates—no matter what we've been through in our past, or what culture tells us, or what our parents went through. We think at some level, “There is a way for me to fall in love and stay in love forever.” It's in you to want that. It's in me to want that. It's not enough to have some fishing buddies, it's not enough to have a few friends that you can go out with on the weekends. It's not enough to have a group of girlfriends to hang out with. There's something in you and me that wants that one somebody special that I can do life with, enjoy life with, become soul mates and have a level of intimacy that goes beyond anything else. We think it's possible for us to find that and that it could possibly last forever. I think that longing and desire is the image of God in us.

A part of making this a reality is making love a verb. Putting love into action. Last week we talked about learning to love like Jesus loved us—what that looks like. But maybe you're thinking today, “It's not that simple.” And it's not. And that's what I want to talk about today.

Now, it would be that simple, “I'm going to put you first and you're going to put me first, we'll put each other first and we'll just be in love, and passionate and hold hands, and be like 16 year olds our whole life.” It would be that simple **if** we came into the relationship with a heart that was very, very full, and a heart that was very, very healthy. If both people came into the relationship, and there had been nothing but awesome, amazing, wonderful relationships in your past, your mom and dad were there for you in everything in life, they poured love into your life and modeled what a great relationship looked like. And on top of that, your friends always poured good things into your life, and were good role models, and nobody ever mistreated you, or abused you, or belittled you, or took advantage of you. If you had spent your life just swimming in joy and acceptance, and affirmation. If that's how you came into the relationship AND your spouse came into the relationship, then all you'd have to do is just put each other first and you could fall in love and stay in love.

But people don't normally come into a relationship with that kind of perfect past. In fact most of us come into our relationships with baggage. We've all been wounded somehow, dinged up a little bit. Whether that was something our parents did or didn't do. Or our peers did or didn't do. Or siblings did or didn't do. We've got stuff. This isn't about a big pity party. The point is, we all come into romantic relationships and our heart isn't always in great shape. In fact there is stuff in us as a result of life and culture and we bring that stuff into the relationship. And if we're not aware of this, get ready for the problems.

I want to take a minute and illustrate what that looks like. To do that I've got a couple of friends here. This is Mr. and Mrs. Mug. Mr. and Mrs. Mug met right after college, the attraction was real, the love was real, they both had degrees and a future. When they first started dating and hanging out they were so careful. He's trying to win her heart, she's trying to win his heart. They were just so careful like most of us were or would be. Like everybody they had a few little, minor, very minor bumps while they dated, but they were so careful.

Then they got married. And about a month into their marriage they had a problem. They had a bump. And stuff came out! And he looked at her and said, "Whoa, where did all that come from?" She looked at him and says, "Well I didn't know you had that kind of anger in you!" He says, "Well I didn't have anger issues until you bumped me!" And then it happens again. And again! And she leaves to go see her sister and says, "I didn't know he was like that!"

And he went to see...guys don't go to see anybody...so he looked in the mirror. And he thought, "She makes me so mad. Whenever she does that thing I get so mad. And if she would quit it, quit bumping me, then I wouldn't be so mad. My wife has issues." He says to her, "When we were dating I didn't see any of this. Where did it come from?" She says, "Whenever we argue you make me act that way."

Now, here's the thing. Mr. Mug thinks the reason the blue beads come out of him is because of her and what she's doing. And Mrs. Mug thinks the pink beads keep coming out her because they keep having problems. But here's the truth: The reason blue beads come out of Mr. Mug is because that's what's in there. And the reason the pink beads come out of Mrs. Mug is because that's what's in there.

You know where I'm going already. All of us have stuff in us. And you don't really know what's in you until you get bumped. And most of us don't get our first real, gut-wrenching, bump until we get into a romantic relationship that we're committed to. There's something about romance and there's something about the commitment to each other, and proximity to each other, that brings out the best, and it brings out the worst in us. "I'm committed to you (bump) but what was all of that?"

And right here is the answer to the mystery! This is why people who make the ultimate commitment to each other end up madder at each other than anybody else on the planet. Because he's absolutely sure that the reason the blue beads come out is because of what she's doing and saying and getting on his nerves. But the truth is the beads come out because they're in there. And she's thinking, "If he would just...stop, start, do more of, less of...the pink beads would quit coming out." But the reason they come out is because that's what's in there. All of us have stuff that's in there. And all of us blame the person we're most in love with for what comes out of us.

So the question is: What do we do? And the answer is pretty simple, but it's something most of us don't do. We have to learn to pay attention to what's going on inside of us.

Here's how Solomon, the writer of Proverbs, put it. Jesus reiterates the same thing in Matthew 15. **"Above all else, guard your heart..." (Proverbs 4:23, TNIV)**. When Solomon says, "Above all else..." he's saying, "This is as important, or more important, than anything else I've ever told you. Don't miss this. Above all else, guard your heart..." He's telling us to pay attention to what's going on on the inside. The heart he's talking about is the seat of emotion. The source of emotions. The writer is telling you and me to pay attention to your heart.

Here's why this is so important: You're in this romantic relationship and all of the sudden this stuff starts spilling out that you didn't know was in you. You blame the other person, maybe you even bail out on the relationship. You end up in another relationship and the same thing starts to happen. The same stuff starts to spill out. And so you go through the same routine again and again. You find yourself saying, "I've been through 3 marriages and a 5 other relationships and the strangest thing is that all those women had the same issues. They bring these blue beads out of me every time." But it's just what's in you. Solomon says, "This is why you need to develop a plan, a strategy, for guarding your heart." Because you can't control another person's behavior. And when their behavior collides with the contents of your heart something is going to spill out and it won't be pretty.

Back to Solomon's words in Proverbs. **"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Proverbs 4:23, TNIV)**. Guard your heart because everything you do, everything you do in your relationship, everything you do romantically, everything you do during the course of your day, everything you do flows from it. When you're in that relationship, your relationship is the overflow of your heart.

Jesus said the same thing. All kinds of things come out through actions and they all come from our heart. Everything you do is the overflow of your heart. So if your heart isn't in good shape it's going to be almost impossible to maintain healthy relationships.

Now you've seen this in other people. It's so easy to spot in other people. You've seen married couples argue, or had friends confide in you about the junk going on in their relationship. You listen to them and think, "Yes, he may have done that but what you did...oooooh. What he did was terrible but your reaction was even worse. He's got issues but you've got them even worse!" We can spot this so easily in others. But it's almost impossible for us to see it in ourselves.

The bottom line here is that **What's in you is going to come out of you regardless of who is with you.** You can change out the person you're with, but eventually what's in you is still going to come out. If you want to stay in love learn to pay attention to, to monitor your heart.

How do we do that? There's an exercise that if you put into practice, it can make all the difference in the world. An exercise that can help you learn to pay attention to what's going on in your heart. This is part of maturing as a believer and one of the keys to staying in love.

So here's the exercise, there are two parts to this. You've heard it said before, think before you speak. So the first part of this exercise is to **stop and think about what you're feeling before you speak.** And the goal is to identify exactly what you're feeling. Men and women struggle with this, but men, we all too often take the easy road and say, "Well, I'm just frustrated." What are you feeling? "Frustrated." What else? "Just frustrated." Or maybe we use the word angry. But men, are those our only two emotions? Pretty much! We can name the happy emotions, but in terms of negative emotions, we got "frustrated" and sometimes, "angry."

So, men and women, let's take a minute and increase our vocabularies. Here are some other emotions that you may have. Because vagueness doesn't cut it. Vagueness doesn't help. You and your spouse have a bump, you and your partner have a bump, some conflict comes up and all of the sudden Mt. Saint Helens erupts all over again. Instead though, you pause and think about what exactly you are feeling. Here are some of those emotions: **I feel...Angry, left out, embarrassed, unappreciated, ugly, un-loveable, failure, old, stupid, lonely, abandoned, scared, out of control, betrayed, disrespected, picked on, jealous.** Guarding your heart means identifying exactly what you're feeling. "I feel insecure. Whew! I finally figured it out."

Here's what you do when you identify it. **You say it out loud to yourself.** Say it out loud. Just to yourself at first: "I feel jealous, that's what I feel. I feel like a failure. When he comes around and starts telling his stories, I feel like a failure." Now you're getting somewhere! Because if you can guard your heart by pinpointing your emotions, then you have power over them (your emotions) rather than them having power over you.

You see, when you let emotions have power over you it's never a good thing. They stay buried and if they stay unidentified like that they exert power over you that drives your life. They drive what you say. They drive what you do. They send you into a funk and you can't talk to anybody, you clam up and, you go into your cave, or they drive you to say things you wish you'd never said. They're powerful.

But if you start unearthing them by naming them, pinpointing your emotions, saying out loud what they are, you will be empowered, because you'll be guarding your heart.

As you begin naming them to yourself you see the situation more clearly. "When my wife talks about her brother and all he's doing it's not that she's trying to make me feel bad, she just loves her brother and she's proud of him. This is a me issue. This is my bead. I think I've got to own this one. I think I might even owe her an apology. Why does his success make me feel like such a failure? I need to figure that out."

Here's what you'll find. Much of what you feel is stuff you brought into the relationship that has nothing to do your husband or wife, or boyfriend or girlfriend, or fiancé. Their words and actions just bring something to the surface that was already in you. There's huge freedom when you begin to discern between what they said and what you feel.

So you name it, say it out loud, and then sometimes, **When it's appropriate, you tell your partner.** Mr. Mug says to Mrs. Mug, "I've found that whenever you say those things to me when I tell you I'm going to be home late from work, I've got to tell you, I just feel unappreciated." Remember, there are no bad feelings, there are just feelings. So when someone you love says to you, "When you do this, when you say this it makes me feel a certain way..." That's not a criticism of you. It's their observation of what's going on inside of them. And when somebody says something like that to you, you don't need to take it personally, it's just information. Your response should be, "I'm so glad you told me." And then, here's the most important part...(silence). Yeah. Don't say anything more. "I'm so glad you figured that out and I'm so glad you told me." Do not say, "Well you shouldn't feel that way!" (beads flying!). Do not say, "I'm sorry you feel that way." No. It's, "I'm so glad you told me."

And then watch this, healthy people, when they discover that something they do or say elicits negative emotions, or hurt, in their partner, when they discover that, healthy people quit doing it. They don't say, "Well you'll just have to deal with it." They don't say, "You should grow up. You should be more mature." They quit doing it.

If you want to stay in love, you start paying attention to your heart. That's how you stay in love. I challenge you this week to start paying attention to your heart and start asking, "What exactly am I feeling?" Then say it out loud. Then look at what you just said out loud and look at what they did to elicit that then you say, "You know what? I don't think this is a relationship problem. I think this is a heart problem. Lord, God, help me overcome what's inside of me."

So Solomon says, "Above all else, guard your heart, everything you do flows from it." What's in you is going to come out of you. So to stay in love we guard our hearts by paying attention to what's in us.

Will you give it try? Will you put this into practice so that, so that, you can have what you want so deeply, to be in love and stay in love. Will you turn all this into a prayer to the God who loves you, who made you and say, "God, help me to pinpoint what I'm feeling and why I'm feeling it right now. And help me to speak it out loud and when it's appropriate to my spouse, my partner." And because they love you, perhaps they'll say, "I'm so glad you told me. Because I never ever want to make you feel that way again."

Guard your heart. That's one of the keys to staying 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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