

“What’s Love Got to Do with It?—Love and Marriage”

Today we’re continuing this series of messages on the book of the Bible called First Corinthians. It’s actually a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a church he had helped to start in the Roman city of Corinth. It was a church that was trying to live out what it looked like to follow Jesus in a city that had only just been exposed to Christianity. It was a city known in the ancient world as the seediest, most immoral, most materialistic and arrogant city.

The people that Paul was writing to were brand-new followers of Jesus from all walks of life. Jew, non-Jew, rich, poor, slaves, business people, men and women. They each brought an old life with them and were trying to figure out how to live a new life of following Christ. And that brought up all kinds of questions, all kinds of conflicts, all kinds of issues. That’s why Paul was writing this letter. To answer questions, to address conflicts, to help these new followers of Jesus make course-corrections in their journey of faith.

And this relevant to us today because some of the issues those Christians faced, are some of the same things that Christians today face. And Paul gives some direction and instruction on this that we can apply to our lives.

So far we’ve talked about holiness, conflict, and love. Last week Pastor Mark talked about issues of sexuality. Today we’re going to look at another issue that Paul hits head-on, another issue that is a big part of our lives today: Marriage. And since Mark picked some appropriate(?) music last week to illustrate. I have too. How about this one from a famous crooner...**[Intro to “Love and Marriage” sung by Frank Sinatra].**

In chapter 7 Paul talks about 8 or 9 dimensions of marriage. This section is the most comprehensive treatment of marriage in the entire Bible. And Paul starts this section by writing, “Now concerning the things you wrote about...” So Paul is answering questions that these new followers of Jesus are asking about marriage.

And one of the first issues he addresses is that of sexual intimacy in marriage. There are some in the church in Corinth who say that a man and wife should not have sexual intimacy in marriage. They were saying that a husband and wife should control sexual desire and refrain in order to be more pure and more dedicated to God.

You’ll be happy to know that Paul says, “No way!” He says, **“Each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:2-3, TNIV).**

Paul talks about the mutuality of that intimacy saying that, **“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” (1 Cor. 7:4, TNIV).**

Paul says don’t refrain from sex within the marriage covenant. That’s the place for it. If you refrain it can cause you to fall into temptation and sin.

Next Paul mentions singleness. Paul lived in world where most people believed that everyone was supposed to be married. That was the case in the Jewish faith, that was the case in the Greco-Roman world. But Paul says, “Wait a minute. Some of you may be called to be single in life, and that is a truly high calling. Being single and a follower of Christ will allow you to do some things that you couldn’t do if you’re married and have kids.”

Paul says being single is a wonderful calling from God because you can fully devote your life to him. And at the same time Paul says, especially in some of his later writings, the marriage is to be celebrated. Both are valid choices for Christians. If you’re single today and wondering if any of this relates to you the answer is yes! Especially if one day you’d like to be married. But if you don’t marry, then everything we talk about today still relates to how to have successful relationships in general.

Then Paul talks about divorce. He says that followers of Christ should not get divorced, that Jesus told us we should not get divorced. He’s crystal clear on this, but then he has this interesting statement: “But if you do divorce”...and then he gives instructions about what to do if you must divorce. There’s this interesting mix of lifting up the value of marriage and working hard and making marriage work, and at the same time recognizing our human condition, our brokenness, and the fact that sometimes it doesn’t work.

Then Paul answers questions that people had regarding if a Christian is married to a non-Christian. Marriages where one spouse is a believer and the other is not, well that caused problems then and it causes problems now. Paul says that this is his own advice and not a command of God. But he says, stay married if you can, work things out, but if the non-believing partner walks away, let them go.

Paul gives all this advice in response to the questions that the Corinthians asked him. But I want to spend the rest of our time looking at 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. This is the chapter of the Bible that gets read at almost every wedding. Half or more of you had it read at your wedding. I read it at almost every wedding I perform. It contains almost everything we need to have healthy marriages. We’re going to read this in a minute but before we do let’s look at some advice on marriage from some others.

One older woman giving advice to younger women said this, “You need to understand, girls, that men are like fine wine. They all start out like grapes. And it’s the wife’s job to stomp on them and keep them in the dark until they mature into something you’d like to have dinner with.”

Rodney Dangerfield gave this advice to young men. “My wife and I were happy for about 20 years and then we met.”

One woman said, “My husband bought me mood ring the other day. And my ring is green when I’m in a good mood. And then when I’m in bad mood, it leaves a red mark on my husband’s forehead.”

Youngman said, “The secret of a great marriage...remains a secret.” Well, not exactly. There are things that we can learn from the scriptures and from each other that will help us to pursue a strong and healthy marriage.

I looked at a couple of surveys on marriage last week and thought about giving you some stats, some facts and figs, but here’s the thing that all the surveys bring out: **Healthy marriages are healthy because we understand the needs of our mate and we’re intentional about trying to meet those needs.** Understanding needs and intentionally trying to meet those needs.

I got this in the mail a couple of months ago. It’s a nice little letter from my bank saying that I had insufficient funds in my account to cover checks I had written. Actually it’s not so nice. I had tried to draw out more than I had deposited. Honest mistake--what happened is that I accidentally put a paycheck into saving instead of checking. But here’s the thing, each spouse in a marriage has a love bank account and you make deposits into your spouse’s love bank account and you make withdraws. And if you’re not making regular deposits into that love bank and regularly meeting their needs, if you’re only making withdraws to meet your own needs, you’re going find that that bank account gets drained and there are insufficient funds. You keep doing that and the account will close forever—if you are not attentive to the needs of your mate.

I will give you these stats from a survey in a Methodist church in the Kansas City area. Men, get out your pens. Because when women were asked, “**What do you wish your husbands would do more of?**” Here’s the top five responses: **1. I wish he would share his thoughts and feelings more with me. 2. I wish he would plan romantic evenings more often for us. 3. I wish he would listen to me—with eye contact. 4. I wish he would worship and pray with me more than he does. 5. I wish he would complete household chores.**

Ladies get out your pens. Here’s what the men said they wished you’d do more of: “**What do you wish your wives would do more of?**” **1. Sexual intimacy. 2. Demonstrations of affection. 3. Have more fun with me. 4. Express admiration more often. 5. Listen to me.**

The five on these lists may not be your needs. So part of what each of us needs to do is to have a conversation with our spouse and ask, “What’s on your list?” “I’ll show you my list if you show me yours.” “How can I bless you, minister to you and meet your needs?” That would be a great conversation to have today after worship.

So that leads to the time in this series where you ask THE question. THE question you’ve asked every week so far. Last week Mark had you sing it, so let’s do that again! **What’s love got to do with it?**

Actually that’s the wrong question today! The right question for today is, “**What is love?**” What is the love that a marriage can be built on? The reason why that’s the right question is because we can get so confused about this. We fall in love with somebody. There’s the chemistry, and the euphoria, and the warm fuzzy feelings, and all that. There is nothing like those feelings of falling in love. Falling in love is great. It is a God-given form of love. But that euphoric love is about attraction. That kind of love helps you find someone you **might** marry, but you can’t build a marriage just on that kind of love. Because that kind of love fades pretty quickly. It’s a kind of love that’s meant to provide attraction, but it’s not a foundation. After a few months of those feelings, she realizes that he doesn’t want to talk for hours at a time anymore like he did, and has a hard time expressing his feelings. And he realizes that she doesn’t want him to hang out with his buddies all the time like he used to. We all have our love goggles on when we’re in love and all we see is the good stuff and we don’t see the bad stuff.

But then you get married and the euphoria fades and the love goggles don’t work as well and the stuff we didn’t see, we start to see, and it begins to bug us. Then you go through another phase. The discovery phase in marriage. You discover all the things you didn’t discover in your due-diligence period. He seems to belch all the time, not to mention what comes out the other end...all the time. He never did that when you were dating! She becomes a different person at different times of the month. He wants to play softball four nights a week. She looks different without her makeup on. And he has about 30 irritating habits. And she never writes her checks down.

The euphoria has faded! The love goggles don’t work anymore! And now it’s time to go back and read that passage of scripture from 1 Corinthians 13 you had read at your wedding. You picked it because it said love, love, love and you weren’t really paying attention. But now it’s time to go back and say, “What does this passage really mean? Now I really need to know.”

So, let's listen to this with fresh ears, even if we've heard it before, to see what it says about marriage. This is kind of love you build a marriage on. **"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails"** (1 Cor 13:4-8, TNIV).

The Greek word for love here, is the word *agape*. That's the same word that's used to describe God in the New Testament. When it says, "God is love." God is *agape*. This is the defining characteristic of God, of who God is. God has a kind of love that sacrifices, that gives, that is determined, that is absolutely committed to what is best for the others. The Gospels talk about what Jesus did on the cross as *agape*. He's not feeling giddy euphoria on the cross. He's not feeling warm fuzzies. He is determined to lay down his life in order to save and redeem all people. That is love, and that's the kind of love God calls all people to. Our goal is to become like that. The decision to put my own needs second and be concerned most about your needs. To determine to do that even if it costs me something. This is the kind of love you build a marriage on.

Paul tells us two things that love is and 8 things that love is not. Let's focus on what love is. It's patient. This kind of patience means when you're wronged by somebody and you have the power to avenge yourself, you don't do it. This kind of patience means you are slow to anger. You have thick skin for offenses, when somebody demeans you, you show love through patience.

Paul is saying that love is like this, and God is like this. God has the power to avenge when he's wronged but doesn't. God is slow to anger. God endures when he is demeaned, degraded. God is love. God is patient. God tolerates us, loves us despite our failures. God says, "Even though you turn away from me, I'm still going to love you, despite your shortcomings, I will still love you."

We're called to operate the same way toward others. Our spouses are not perfect, they're flawed and we love them anyway. If you're going to have a marriage that lasts, you're going to be willing to overlook offenses—I'm not talking about abuse here. I'm talking about more ordinary every day offenses that we choose to overlook. And sometimes it's hard to live out.

While Janet and I went to see family on Christmas Day last year our house was broken into and robbed. If you've had that happen you know that you feel violated and scared. They didn't steal much but we were worried they might come back. I flew into motion. Making calls to the police, the insurance company, to get the widow fixed, to get a security system installed. I went out and bought motion lights and installed them on every side of the house. I began to fill out the endless paperwork for the insurance company. It was just a huge pain. It was stressful and I hated it.

When they installed the security system the installers stepped through the ceiling so we had to have that hole repaired, and the repair was worse than the damage so we had to have the entire ceiling redone. It was just a huge stressor and time drain. I'm doing my best to protect my family, and work with the insurance company and the police. And Janet, my loving wife of almost 15 years now, made a comment about how inconvenient it was to have to disarm the alarm every time she came in.

I just about came unglued! My lazy eye shot off to one side, that twitch came into my cheek. All that work that I had done and she was complaining about punching a few buttons. Oh my! I was hurt. I felt like I had done all this work to protect my family and all it amounted to was an inconvenience to her.

Now, that's such a rarity with us, and I was worn thin by everything, but those are the kinds of situations every marriage faces in one form or another. And when we face those we have the choice. Are we going to focus on the offenses, or are we going to focus on the blessings. If you focus on offenses, you will be miserable your whole life—guaranteed! If you choose to focus on the things that are good, and make them better, then good things flourish. Paul says, that's what love looks like. That's patience. Love doesn't give up quickly.

Paul says love is kind. The Greek work for kindness means doing what is useful or needful for others. In marriage it means asking, "How can I bless you? How can I meet your needs?" Oh, and this kindness is something you show and live even when the other person might not deserve it. We do it because it's the mission of marriage, because that's what love looks like.

So what does kindness look like? I read something last week called the toilet-seat theory of marriage. It comes from a 25 year long study of 670 couples. Dr. John Gottman, the lead researcher, found that it is the mundane events of everyday life that build love in marriage. An example is when a man puts the toilet seat down. That act holds a major clue to the success of the marriage. It's a sign that the husband understands and respects his wife's needs and is open to the kinds of simple actions the lead to long-term marital stability.

Gottman spent 25 years scrutinizing what actually goes on in marriage, from newlyweds to retirees. He found that only 20% of divorces are caused by an affair. He wrote, "Most marriages die with a whimper as people run away from one another, slowly growing apart."

But love is kind. It intentionally does those things that bless the other. I've shared before that I know the secret to a happy, healthy, loving, exciting marriage. I know it. It is one simple sentence that if both husband and wife keep in the forefront of their minds they can't go wrong. The sentence is this: **"How can I serve her?" "How can I serve him?"** Little acts of kindness done regularly. Little acts of love.

I could do a lot better, but I try to live this out. These seem so trivial but this is how I often answer the question, "How can I serve my wife Janet?" I turn my t-shirts right-side-out when I take them off, and turn my socks right-side-out when I take them off, because it's one less thing my wife has to do when she folds the laundry. I try to empty the dishwasher when it's done. I clean up after myself when I make a meal or mess. I try to do chores around the house before being asked—except go through the piles of mail! I try to keep that sentence in front of me all the time, and so does she. That's love lived out as kindness. It's being in touch with the needs of your mate and trying your best to meet those needs. "How can I serve her?" "How can I serve him?"

And listen, this isn't about doing kind things when you feel like it. It's real easy to say, "I'm not doing anything kind, I don't feel like it and I don't feel like you deserve it!" But showing love, showing kindness, when you don't feel like it, when you think your spouse doesn't deserve it and you're kind anyway--that's called grace. God pours it out to you and me all the time. And we're called to pour out unmerited, unearned love especially toward our spouses.

Oh, and watch this! When you do loving things, and kind things even when you don't feel like, the loving feelings follow! Our society says you having loving feelings for people and then doing loving things. That's just wrong! You doing loving things for people and loving feelings follow. Love is kind.

As we wrap up I want you to listen to a song the band going to play. It's a new song out by Warren Barfield called "Love is not Fight".

Some of you may have known Arthur and Marge Hinnah. Arthur was a pastor at Saint Paul's about 30 years ago and when he retired they called Saint Paul's their church home. They were married about 60 years and in their 80's became frail. But their tenderness and care for one another never faded.

Arthur found that he had cancer and that took his life. Marge moved into a nursing home and died not long after. They had one of the deepest loves I have ever seen, and faced some of the biggest difficulties a couple could face. Through it all, they weathered the storms.

After Marge died her son brought by a box of their belongings for me to have. I put it in the closet in my office and it sat there for a long time. Then one day I made the time to go through that box. It had all kinds of things in it, but more than anything it full of birthday cards they had given each other over the years. It had anniversary cards and special occasion cards, notes, letters. I read them all. I wasn't snooping, I don't think. It was one of the most beautiful things. Their handwritten notes of love, and admiration, intimacy, care, respect, romance. I got an inside picture of a couple I already deeply respected. A couple who lived out the kind of love the Paul describes. A kind of love where they determined and lived out building each other up.

I saw in them a love that is...**"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails"** (1 Cor 13:4-8, TNIV).

That's how we love in a way that makes marriage last for a lifetime. That's a love worth fighting for. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.