

Staying in Love: Multiple Choice Marriage

May 30, 2010

So we are in the final message in this series about staying in love. We all know what's required to fall in love..a pulse. Falling in love is easy. But staying there? That's something else!

The Big Question for this whole series has been: Is it 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, because there is something in us that longs for that. It's in you to want that. It's in me to want that. That's the way we are wired, the way we are created. I think it's a reflection of God in our heart and soul.

Let's look back at what we covered so far about staying in love: A part of making this a reality is making love a verb. Putting love into action. Then we looked at the challenge to model our love in our relationships from Jesus' love. Last week we learned to pay attention to our hearts. We all have stuff in us...remember Mr and Mrs Mug?...and when we get bumped, our stuff spills out, and we get bumped the hardest in romantic relationships. So staying in love requires careful monitoring of our own hearts...recognizing our feelings and where they are coming from.

Today I want to look at a decision everyone in love makes on a constant basis. I don't think we are always aware, but we make this choice all the time. Everyone in love makes it daily, probably, and the habit you form about this choice has a lot to do with whether or not you are able to stay in love.

A repeated theme in this series is that what you once did intuitively in your relationship when your romance was young, you probably stopped doing with the passage of time. The same is true with this choice, and because we fall out of some of the habits of doing what we once did, we consequently begin to undermine our own love relationship. My wife, Jennifer and I were just talking about this the other night as we were discussing this series. In the last year or so, we have very intentionally tried to reintroduce the habits and attitudes of young love into our relationship, and it has been great! We started doing little things for each other like we used to...serving each other, finding ways to express appreciation. And it makes such a difference!

So when it comes to this choice, it is something you once did, but with the passage of time you may have stopped doing and part of what I want to do today is to help all of us think about the way we respond when we are making this choice...because the choice we make has the power to start spirals in our relationship...and that spiral can go either direction.

So let's take a look at the passage that is going to help us get to this choice we will be making multiple times in our relationship. It comes from I Corinthians 13. You may know this chapter. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, and this church is struggling with this whole idea of "love one another". So Paul tells illustrates what this amazing love of God looks like in action. You probably know this passage. Most of us had this passage read at our weddings because it is this poetic description of love. I'm not sure Paul meant for it to be poetry...Paul was pretty practical. For Paul, this passage is less about the ideal of love and way more about the action of love.

Most of this passage is pretty sensible. When you read it, you think, "yea, that makes sense". But there's one verse, verse 7, actually one phrase of verse 7 that doesn't seem very realistic. I've even thought, "I'm not sure that's good advice...not sure I really believe that". What I've come to understand is that Paul is trying to say one very powerful thing about what God-like love looks like, and instead of one simple statement, he makes four statements

that go together to communicate one powerful idea. So let's take a look at it. ***“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.”***

1 Corinthians 13:4-6

So now Paul gets to his point and he takes four phrases and puts them together to make this one point and he is getting to one of the most important habits, most important practices about making love a verb in all our relationships, but especially in romantic love. He says, ***“It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*** ***1 Corinthians 13:7.*** You may know this passage better from the King James, where it is translated like this, "it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." I can pretty well follow all the other verses, but I'm not really sure what it means to ALWAYS protect, ALWAYS trust, ALWAYS hope, or ALWAYS persevere. That's a lot of stuff...heavy, unrealistic stuff. So what is he trying to say?

To help us see what Paul is trying to say I want to step away from the Bible for a minute and just look at the reality of our relationships. In every relationship, every relationship, from great to really struggling, there is a gap. There will always be a gap. **And that gap is the space between expectation and behavior.** In every relationship there will always be gaps between expectations and behavior. I expected you to do this, and in reality you did that instead. This happens not just once or once in a while, but over and over in relationships, especially romantic relationships. Here is what this looks like in real life.

- You said you'd meet me at 6, you weren't there
- It's your job to take out the trash, and you didn't do it today.
- you said you'd pay the bills, but look this one is late
- You said we could get away this weekend and now you have to work

This gap goes both ways in your relationship..no one's perfect, right?

Today I'm not talking about the kinds of gaps in expectation that would immediately throw the entire relationship into question like infidelity or abuse or something like that. I'm talking about the day to day expectations, gaps that may cause disappointment and frustration which can easily turn to anger and resentment.

Even in the best marriages, there is a gap. So we have to make a choice about what we put into this gap...and this is important...because you will make this choice over and over and over. And this choice starts in your own head. You cannot control the actions of your spouse. What you can control is your response..you. So when your spouse does not meet your expectations, you go somewhere. That action takes you somewhere and starts to form your response.

Basically you go to one of two places. Either you **assume the worst** or you **believe the best.** You **assume the worst** or you **believe the best.**

Where do you go? When this gap comes in your relationship, where do you go?

We encounter this choice all the time, so often, that we have formed habits for how we respond and we often respond without even pausing or thinking about it. It's automatic. And you probably know which way you usually respond. If you don't, then ask your spouse, he or she can tell you. Here's the deal....couples move from "I want to spend the rest of my life with this person" to "I'm not sure how much longer I can stay with this person" in part by choosing to **assume the worst.**

It sounds something like this:

I knew you'd be late, you're always late, you're never ever going to be on time.

more examples...

The effect on your relationship of assuming the worst is that it starts a spiral of decisions and responses each based on the previous. And when you choose to assume the worst you are choosing several things....

- **RIGHT.** You get to be right. They said they'd be there, they weren't there. They said they'd pay the bill, they didn't pay the bill. You are right..you are claiming the right to be right. Part of your job in a marriage is to know when being right is significant enough to induce conflict – always with the plan that the conflict will lead to resolution. There are times when something is meaningful enough to talk about it. But part of your job in relationships is to know when being right is really not all that important.

Just the other day, Jennifer pushed me on something. It wasn't a big deal, but it was important enough that she needed to say something. She was not angry, she just told me her opinion about something...and that opinion happened to be different than mine. So there's a bit of conflict, and I don't like to deal with conflict...my mind goes bluh...and I start feeling very, well, conflicted. So I fumbled around, conversationally, saying some things that I'm sure made no sense at all. And after the immediacy of conflict calmed down, I just went to her and said, "Hey, we need to talk". Then I said, "You're right!" (And she usually is).

What I am trying to say is that there are obviously times you need to sit down and talk out some issues. The technique we are talking about today is not a license to avoid issues. At the same time, however, you don't have to be right every time you're right! You get that right? I Cor 13:6 tells us that "love keeps no record of wrongs". Sometimes we can put being "right" above everything else and that can be very damaging to relationships, because it leads to...

- **RESENTMENT.** When you choose to assume the worst and choose to be right, you are also choosing resentment. Instead of letting it go, you hold onto it, so that when it happens again, and it usually does, you can not only be right again, but you can pull the past into the present. And that can put you in an adversarial role instead of a loving partnership, where winning becomes a greater objective than loving. You can get filled with resentment that they don't meet your expectations and they will get filled with resentment because they can never live up.

All this can lead to a negative spiral of brokenness and mistrust and it pushes love away...it pushes your spouse away from you and the next time it's easier to choose to assume the worst because you have resentment going and you're right and then you're choosing not to put any effort anymore in because they don't seem to be putting any effort in and then it gets to where you dread to answer the phone because it's him or you dread hearing the garage door open because it means she's home.

I can hear you, but Mark, they are the one who doesn't live up to the expectation. I can you saying, "You don't know, preacher, what she did, or what he does. You don't know my story!" I just want to ask you to put your objections aside for a minute and stay with me, ok?

And maybe you're saying, I know how to solve this problem! Let's just close this gap between expectation and behavior. If they would just do what they said they'd do, then we wouldn't have this problem. But let's remember, no one is perfect...we will all fall short...even you and me...there will always be gaps, so we have to learn to deal with them.

Here's the tougher truth...when we choose to assume the worst, we become participants (it's not all them!) in creating a cycle that separates and divides and pushes away. When there is a gap, you cannot control their

behavior...you can only control your response.

And the way that couples who have learned to stay in love respond in this gap is to habitually choose to believe the best. This could come very naturally for them, but it's way more likely that they have worked to create this habit of believing the best. This happens when people are generous....they see the gap and come up with a generous explanation.

And believing the best sounds like this...

- It's ok that you're late...it gave me a chance to relax and unwind.
- I know you didn't mean to overlook this bill, so let's just take care of it together.
- Instead of telling your spouse that they left food in the sink again, you just turn on the disposal and wash it on down.
- I know you forgot to take care of this...no problem, it happens to me.

Believing the best deflates instead of escalates the gap. It relieves pressure and guilt and communicates acceptance instead of judgment.

There is a leadership book called "One thing you need to know" by Marcus Buckingham. It's not a marriage book, it's a leadership, management book. And the point of the book is that in any field, any discipline, there is one thing you need to know.

To illustrate the theory, the author used an illustration from marriage. There was a group of researchers who wanted to study good marriage...people who were happy in their marriage and had been married at least 10 years. And the researchers assumed that they already knew the answer based on a previous study of unhappy couples. This previous study determined that the one thing in common with unhappy couples was a huge misunderstanding between the couples as to what the other person was really like. There was a real disconnect in their understanding of each other.

So the researchers assumed that the one thing for the happy couples would be the opposite...that the happy couples would have a deep understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses and a very realistic set of expectations because of that.

The real discovery was that happy couples in fact have a very unrealistic view of each other. What they asked the couples to do was to rate themselves on a set of criteria and then rate their spouse on the same characteristics. Consistently throughout the study, both spouses rated their partners higher in every category than their spouses rated themselves. So in my life, that would mean that I would rate Jennifer higher in all the categories or characteristics than Jennifer would rate herself.

Now the conclusion is that LOVE REALLY IS BLIND! Happy couples do not have realistic views of each other. Here's what the researchers wrote,

A spouse's positive illusion created an upward spiral of love..."

Now before you think that sounds crazy...this is exactly what you did when you fell in love! You saw no faults, right? Your friends said, "He's kinda a slob", but you looked right over that, right? You have done this...the secret is to keep doing it! Back to what the researchers wrote:

A spouse's positive illusion created an upward spiral of love. The illusion created a conviction. The conviction led to security. Security fostered intimacy and the intimacy fostered love."

Where this all comes down is this...when your wife assumes that you have strengths that you don't think you have and vice-versa, then that is evidence of a strong relationship!

Here is the advice from the study...."find the most generous explanation for each other's behavior, then believe it! When you choose to **believe the best** you are choosing to be **gracious and understanding**. You are choosing a generous explanation. If your husband or wife is late, they already know they're late! And nobody likes to disappoint the people they love. It's not like they created this gap for the intention of driving a wedge into your relationship. They know they forgot something. They realize they didn't pay the bill. And instead of pointing out their error and inducing guilt, if you can respond with grace and understanding you can remove obstacles to your relationship and create acceptance and warmth and draws your husband or your wife toward you, not away from you. So now that we have this picture in our minds...there's a gap between expectation and behavior and we either to put "assume the worst" or "believe the best" into that gap. Now I want to take us back to I Corinthians 13:7, "***It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.***"

Remember, Paul is making one point here and he's saying it 4 times over in slightly different ways. What I think Paul is getting to is this; Love is the only thing that overcomes the gaps **between expectation and reality**. Love acts in ways that protect the relationship; love acts in ways that build trust; love always hopes in the relationship; love endures over all else.

Assuming the worst does not protect the relationship, it brings resentment; assuming the worst reduces, not increases, trust; Assuming the worst moves you toward hopelessness; assuming the worst pursues a "win" that is something other than love.

Believing the best protects your relationship from guilt and resentment; it creates greater trust; builds up hope and encouragement, and it seeks a win of acceptance and love.

I can imagine that for some of you this sounds like religious psycho babble. You may be thinking that I am a bit out of touch with your reality... That I don't know your story, how hard you really have it. You may be thinking, "get serious, Mark". Believe the best...that's what you have for me...but you don't know what she does, what he does." I'll admit that I have a naïve streak in me, but I am not naïve about what people who love each other can do to each other. I've been in ministry a long time. I know stories that are worse than yours. Honestly, I've been in this place of assuming the worst in my marriage. I know what this does...and I know what it takes to repair the damage and get back on a healthy course. So I'm anything but naïve about this.

I'm telling you straight up...one way works, one way doesn't. One way leads to staying in love, one way leads to separation in one form or another.

If you're thinking, "I can't do this...how can I be gracious and understanding? I'm not sure I can do that...I don't want to believe the best." Let me ask you to think about it this way. There is another relationship in your life where there is always a gap between expectation and behavior. Paul names it for us in Romans 3:23, TNIV "***for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***" We do the same things over and over; we do the same sins that separate us from God and every week we come to worship and we do what? We ask for forgiveness. And how does God respond? Does God **assume the worst** about us? That God is right and we are wrong so live with it? Does Jesus reject us and push us away and allow guilt and blame to fester and grow like a cancer?

Jesus **believes the best** about us? He offers us grace and forgiveness. He accepts us as we are and invites us to grow and change into the people we were meant to be as we walk journey of life with him. And it doesn't matter

how many times we have let him down; even though our behavior constantly fails to measure up to the expectation. Jesus responds to us with grace and forgiveness and acceptance. He draws us toward him. Jesus would always be right, we would always be wrong. But the win for Jesus is not to be right, but to be loving...loving in a way that changes us.

So this takes us back to week 1 of the series...to put love into action. Our theme verse that week was John 13 when Jesus gave us a new command; "As I have loved you, he said, love one another!" And this is our challenge for staying in love. To love others, to love your husband or your wife as Jesus loves us; And you can do this...you can believe the best, even in the toughest circumstance, no matter your story. You can start believing the best...extending grace and understanding and acceptance. And it can change your relationship. And you have the power to do this because you have received it. Jesus love and acceptance (even though we don't deserve it – we don't measure up) has changed your life. We know how it feels to fall short and not measure up and experience Jesus' love anyway! The power to love and forgive is in you; the power of grace and acceptance is in you and the most important place for you to use that power is in your closest relationships.

So every time you are in this gap between expectation and behavior, where are you going to go? Pause and think, "am I about to assume the worst or believe the best"?

Thank God for the Good news of Jesus Christ! Because he conquered that gap for us, through his love we can conquer that gap in our relationships.