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LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH Michael B. Beough
Ephesians 5:21-33 May 4, 2008
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This is always risky preaching about marriage, children, relationships. For one thing, I have to be careful not to embarrass my own family. Besides my family knows me better than anyone else, and so I can't pretend I know it all or do it all right. For another thing, not everyone is married or plans to get married, not everyone has children (next Sunday), and not everyone has trouble in their relationships (May 18). So who is this for?

My justification – Whatever the case with you, whatever your current situation, all Christians need to be conversant about healthy relationships, what they look like and how we get them. You never know when you might be in a position to help someone else who is struggling. So even if you are not married or have no intention of getting married, hang in here with me today as we focus on marriage.

My premise: Almost all relationships between married partners can be better than they are right now. I know some of you are thinking, "How could it be any better?" Well, that's what the fox said as he was sitting in the hen house plucking feathers from his teeth. It is at least probable that one partner in every marriage wishes something could be better in the relationship. And maybe both are thinking it but are afraid to say it. On the other hand, some of you might be thinking that your relationship is so far gone that there is no hope. If you stick with me, I hope you will see that that is not necessarily true.

So let's jump right into it by asking: Why would we want to go to the trouble of improving the relationship? What would motivate us?

Because God wants us to enjoy life. Marriage is one place where God can intensify the enjoyment of both partners, but it takes both wanting to achieve that.

Because for Christians marriage reflects the relationship of Christ with His church. In Ephesians 5, as the Apostle Paul writes about marriage, he says he is really talking about the relationship between Christ and his church. He calls it a mystery. In marriage, we reflect the same mystery, the same kind of relationship. Christ is our model. We model Christ to the world.

Because healthy marriages are more likely to produce healthy children and just societies and longer life. This doesn't mean in every case. No does it mean that single parents cannot have healthy children. But statistically, it is more the case than not. We will talk more about this next week.

So what can we do to make our marital relationships better?

It might surprise some of you that I would choose Ephesians 5:21-33 to talk about healthy marriages. This passage has been used, and continues to be used by some, to assign women a subservient role in marriage. I can see that here, especially if we focus only on verses 22-24. That is a tragic mistake! I believe Paul has the opposite intention. He is the Dr. Phil of the New Testament. He wants to advise couples on how in their marriage they can reflect the purposes of God and how they can elevate each other through a mutually affirming partnership.

We must take verses 21 and 33 into account as the framework for understanding this passage. "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" (vs. 21) I take this to mean that Christian couples intentionally practice the art of seeking what is best for the other partner. This is what Christians strive for in a world where marriages often hang by the fingernails of convenience and bare tolerance. And in verse 33, "*Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.*" Paul has far more to say in this passage to husbands. The husband the wife is to respect is the one who is striving to love his wife just as Christ loves the church and gave his life for it. This is a mutually affirming partnership between husband and wife.

Here is my point this morning. It takes far more than love (whatever you mean by that) to have the kind of marriage God wants for us.

So let me share with you my Four C's of a healthy marriage.

Commitment – I spent time last week going through books on marriage at a local book store. One book I read said it is unrealistic to ask couples when they marry to vow to love and honor one another for life. The author suggested striking "til death do us part" from the ceremony. She said no one can promise that kind of commitment, and it creates unrealistic expectations. I put that book back on the shelf and kept looking until I found one that I agreed with.

If you want some practical help for making your marriage better, I recommend "Fighting for Your Marriage". It is a secular book, but it says many of the things that Christians value. It says, for example, that a lifelong commitment is the only thing that can create a feeling of emotional safety. In other words, if we are committed for life, then I can be sure my partner is not going to run out on me when I make my first mistake or when I wake up in the morning looking like a wadded up dishrag. This commitment frees me from living on pins and needles, wondering if something I have done is going to end it all. I can be sure that my partner is as committed as I am to working out our differences and growing in our relational skills. And as

forgiving, because a lifelong commitment will require the practice of forgiveness.

Let's take it one step further. It is not just a commitment to the other person. It is a commitment to working out the differences in order to improve the relationship and the joy of living together. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:33, it is a commitment to love and respect. The truth is, most marriages can get better over time if we are willing to stick with each other and be intentional about growing the relationship.

Now, what happens when that commitment begins to crack? We will talk about that on

Communication –My guess is that everyone here knows the importance of communication. I know how important it is and still mess up big time with this one.

Teresa and I still laugh about one of our classic mess ups in communication. We were driving somewhere on a trip. This was years ago. I drove a long time before I needed to stop. When I did stop, I caught an earful about how she had hardly been able to hold it in, and why didn't I stop when she told me she needed to stop miles back. I looked at her in disbelief and said quite honestly, "I didn't hear you tell me you needed to stop." Did too. Did not. Kids, did your mom say it out loud? Don't know. Did too. Did not. We never agreed whether she said it out loud or not, but that wasn't the end of it. She said something like, "Well, you could have asked me if I needed to stop!" Ouch. That hurt. She was right, but that hurt. I heard her saying I didn't care about her, but I wanted to get in the last word. "Well, if I had asked, you would have said, 'Oh, stop whenever you want to.'" That was then. But we have come a long way in our communications. Now Teresa might say to me, "Have I said it out loud that I need to stop or did I just think it?" See how far we have come?

Communicate. Learn to say what is going on with you, and then learn to hear what your partner is saying without blowing a gasket. Know the source of most sexual frustration in marriage? Lack of communication. These are actually learnable skills.

Do you want to know one of the triggers to escalating problems in a marriage? Among couples seeking counseling, a major source of trouble reported by the wife is the withdrawal of the husband from conversation. And he will likely complain that the trouble starts with his wife who wants to talk too much about everything. He calls it nagging. She begins to believe he doesn't care. He believes she is only interested in stirring up trouble by criticizing him. Sound familiar to anyone here? Communication means taking responsibility for your own stuff. Making known your needs without blame, and hearing your partners needs without judging.

Cavorting – Don't hear that word much, do you? In other words, have fun together.

Let me ask you something. Can you be married and be friends at the same time? It seems that for many couples, the relationship begins as a friendship but then because of issues, changing circumstances, pressures, children, etc. the friendship aspect just slips away. If it goes far enough, it might even become a hostile relationship as though two enemies were trying to occupy the same territory.

Let me ask you something else, would you ever treat a friend the way you treat your spouse sometimes?

I have to be honest and say no to that. My wife is truly my best friend. I enjoy no one else's company like I enjoy hers. She is the life of my party. I am dull by comparison. But sometimes I do something or say something stupid I would never say to a friend. Kind of takes the fun out of things, if you know what I mean.

Remember Jesus? He went to a wedding party once and turned water into wine, lots of wine. Then things really got going. Lots of merrymaking. Do you think Jesus means for us to have fun in our marriages? Oh, I think so.

Collaboration – I purposely chose the word collaborate over the word compromise. No doubt, there is lots of compromising in a marriage. But I prefer thinking instead about collaboration. Not what do I have to give up or give in to to make this work, but finding those places of similar interests where you can join wholeheartedly in accomplishing something meaningful together. Having children might be one of those collaborations. But it can be simpler than that and even more profound than that. Like finding a cause to work on together. Being true partners in something worthwhile.

Or at a deeper level, couples who report a high degree of satisfaction in their marriages often share a deep spiritual intimacy. For many, religious practice contributes to it. Religious practice opens the door for conversations and reflection together upon the deeper mysteries of life. Christians who marry understand that they have a spiritual resource that can deepen their satisfaction in marriage. I am not talking about an adherence to a religious orthodoxy or doctrine where all the rules are spelled out. I am talking about standing together hand in hand before the mysteries of life and death and trying to see into the depths. To allow for the mystery of God as a unifying foundation.

It seems that couples do not have to agree on the answers or even have the same religion or worldview in order for this spiritual intimacy to grow. On one level, it is not the differences that matter. It is how we handle the differences. On the another level, I believe that many of us miss out on the profound spiritual union that comes by centering our relationships on

Christ. What I have discovered in my own marriage is that Christ provides a third party to whom we both yield out lives. I have found this equality before Christ to be a source of humility. If we can love each other the way he loves us, there will be no limit to our enjoyment and union of spirit and intimacy of life that God intends for us. What a joy experiencing Christ together as the One who knits our hearts together in the mystery of God's love!

Here is my conclusion. If marriage is to reflect Christ's relationship to his church, then I have to believe God doesn't want boring, convenient, contentious, straightjacket, merely tolerated marriages. What would that reflect about God? God is into excitement, adventure, creativity, achievement, sacrifice, excellence, true intimacy, and purpose.

Our marriages can be so much more like what we want and hope for, but it takes more than love. It takes respect, and intentionality, and a desire to work on it. Can you imagine the impact we could have on our families and our communities if people began seeing in our marriages something they only hope for? I think marriage renewal among Christians could become an evangelistic tool. Next time you are listening to someone complain about their marriage or marriage partner, ask them if they have heard about the Four C's of a Great Marriage. You don't have to remember the Four C's, but at least you might be able to give them a sense of hope for something better. And that would be a giant step forward.