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WHEN TROUBLE BEGINS
Matthew 19:3-12
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Love shouldn't hurt! Don't you agree? And yet we often hurt most the very ones we love the most, or should love the most.

We have been talking about relationships in the home. I have tried to give a biblical perspective along with some practical ideas about how to have a great marriage and what it means to parent our children "in the Lord." If you missed those two sermons, you can find them on our website.

My premise has been that nearly all of us can improve our relationship in marriage to get closer to what God intends for us. And nearly all of us can do a better job parenting our children. There is no reason to be stuck where we are.

Now, today, let's get real.

The divorce rate in the U.S. is sky high. And parents even in places like Southlake and Keller can't figure out what's gone wrong with their children. And not just in non-Christian homes, but in our homes where we believe in God and love Jesus Christ and try to serve him. I am still grieved over the death of Jennifer Medina, killed by her husband who then took his own life. She was one of us, a member here, a Sunday School teacher, and none of us knew what she was living with.

The reality is that we might know what relationships are supposed to be like. But we also know how hard it is day in and day out to make them work like God intends. Or to put it another way, we know how easy it is to slip on the proverbial banana peel of life and start on a downward spiral of disillusionment and broken promises.

My first disillusionment with my wife, Teresa, happened on the second night of our honeymoon. We were in New Orleans and I was in the shower getting ready for another romantic evening. From out of nowhere, she stood on the toilet seat in the hotel bath, reached over the top of the shower curtain, and dumped an ice bucket full of ice cold water on my head. She thought it was hilarious. I was furious and grabbed her nose in a death grip. It was the first and only time I ever touched her in anger, but it could have been so easy to start on a downward spiral. Thank God, she brought me to my senses, but it has helped me see just how easy it is to start down the wrong path. I know this is not a major issue, but from all I have been reading, often it starts small and grows.

So what I want to do today is to be an interventionist. I want to talk about how we stop that downward spiral in our marriages, before it gets to

divorce or worse. Even if you are not married, this might give you a way to guide someone else who is on the downward slope.

1. You have to recognize what is going on.

Have you ever heard a divorced person say something like, "I didn't know we had any problems until he filed for divorce"? Or, "I don't know where it all started"? One of the problems in relationships is that we just don't see the trouble coming. We are blind or dumb or both. Sometimes the downward spiral is a silent killer working in the heart of only one partner in the marriage. Sometimes the divorce has already taken place internally for one of the partners.

I'll never forget the shock I felt when one of my best friends told me his parents were getting a divorce. They did it upon his graduation from the University of Texas in Austin. They told him they had always intended to get a divorce once he was out of the house and on his own. A lot of things fell in place for him as he realized he had grown up in a home where his parents had been divorced emotionally all his life. He swore he would never let that happen in his marriage. Does this mean his parents should have divorced legally many years earlier? I don't know. But I do know that living with such deception and dishonesty is not what God intends. And I do believe that his parents could have gotten so much more out of their relationship if they had stopped the spiral early on.

So here are two questions that can put the brakes on the downward spiral. These would be good conversation starters between a husband and wife who want to honor Christ.

"Is each of us receiving the love and respect we need from the other?"

"Does our relationship reflect the deep sacrificial love of Christ for his church?"

You could schedule this conversation, say, every six months, like going to the dentist for a regular check up.

2. You have to want to stop it.

In Matthew 19, Jesus gives us a good reason to want to stop the downward spiral. "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus holds such a high view of marriage that he teaches divorce as a last resort and as a concession to the hardness of the human heart. Even Jesus recognizes that divorce is sometimes the best alternative, especially if one partner is an unrepentant abuser. Abuse takes many forms from physical to sexual to emotional. Abuse is about power, controlling the other person. In my books, that is equivalent to the infidelity Jesus makes exception for.

God does not expect anyone to remain in a home or relationship where abuse and danger prevail and are not likely to subside because of the hardness of heart.

In other words, we do not have the right to break apart what God has put together, or to destroy what God has created. The issue here is violence.

You might wonder why Jesus takes such a hard-nosed stand against divorce. He is actually taking a hard-nosed stand against violence.

Let me tell you the impact of Jesus' stand on marriage. It wasn't to force two people to go on living together in spite of the misery and violence going on in the relationship. His stand on marriage actually elevated the position of the wife and her security in the relationship. In his day, there were teachers of the Law of Moses who taught that a man had the right to divorce his wife for any thing that displeased him. This is how they interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4. He could trade her in for being a sloppy house keeper, or for failing to have children, or any other dreamed up reason. The wife was at his mercy. She was his property.

Jesus said, "Enough of that!" Marriage is a union forged by God where neither owns the other nor has the right to split the union simply because of disappointments, disillusionments, or displeasure.

We don't know if Jesus thought of it this way, but his impact was to end the violence against women by bringing men to a new level of understanding of their responsibility toward their wives and the marriage itself. No wonder his disciples said in verse 10, "Then who would ever want to get married?" "Man, that would sure tie me down!" "You mean I have to keep her, forever?" "That's impossible!"

No, it is possible. Has anyone here been married for 20 years? 30? 40? 50? 60? Let me see your hands. We have two couples here this morning who have been married for over 60 years. It is possible.

Those of you who have been through divorces know what I mean about violence. Some of you lived in a relationship where you were violated daily emotionally. If you are the divorced wife, you probably got violated in the divorce itself. It can go both ways, but my experience is that the divorced wife is most often the one who loses the most. And is often the one who is most willing to give up everything just to get out of the turmoil.

Now, I am not playing a blame game here. What I am saying is that Jesus has set a standard for Christians, a standard that raises the determination of husbands and wives to stop the downward spiral before it goes too far. Not simply because marriages should last forever. But because there is so much more God wants you to get out of your unique union and so much more God wants from you as a model of Christ's love for his church.

3. We have to do something about it.

From what I have been reading in both religious and secular books on marriage, there are far more divorces than need be. There is far more pain in marriages than there has to be. And there is far more damage from divorce than anyone wants there to be.

I happen to believe that Christians have an advantage in marriage. Not that our marriages are trouble-free. Relationships are tough even for Christians. But when trouble begins, when D-Day hits, Disillusionment Day, and it will at some point, we have a model and a resource for dealing with it.

This is where I end this series.

Jesus is the model in his sacrificial love, his respect for every person, and his forgiveness of every sin. Even in my new favorite secular book on marriage, "Fighting for Your Marriage," there is a long section on forgiveness as a key to a happy and healthy marriage. Jesus promises to grow these qualities in each of us as we grow as his disciples.

And he has provided a resource in the community of faith to which we belong. One of the strongest predictors of a healthy marriage is the degree to which a couple participates in a healthy group that will listen, support, and hold them accountable to their marriage vows. If it takes a village to raise a child, it is also true that it takes a village to lift a marriage to the heights of God's intention.

Here at this church, we believe that God wants every one of us to grow as disciples who give their lives to make a difference in the world. We believe God wants every one of us to experience the Peace, Purpose, and Promise of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is our vision for every home represented here and for every home in our communities.

I encourage you today to invite Jesus into your hearts and your homes if you have not done so. And then let him turn your relationships into the kind God has always intended for you.