

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

Extraordinary Love

One of the good things about preaching systematically through a book is that it is harder to avoid certain texts. Today the text in Ephesians is about marriage so here is a note on how to hear this sermon. I recognize that we all come from different places and experiences concerning marriage this morning. It would be easy to avoid this topic – but it is in the text – so we’re going to do it.

Some of us this morning are in good marriages – that’s great – I want to rejoice with you. Some of us this morning are in painful marriages – that’s the truth. And for some of us our marriage is causing us great pain. Some of us are in marriages where our spouse is a non-believer who doesn’t share our faith. Some of us have lost our spouse – either through death or separation. Some of us are single. Some of us are hoping that one day we will marry. Some of us are even now looking forward to our wedding day – and counting the days! Some of us are thinking – I would love to be married but maybe it has passed me by. We can all ask this question though: what would God want to say to me this morning?

If we are married – perhaps we will need to avoid the temptation of thinking what God might say to our spouse! If we are single and hoping to be married we might ask: “What kind of marriage would bring honour to God?” For those of us who have lost our spouse – perhaps this is an opportunity to remember with thanks the person we’ve lost. For all of us it’s an opportunity to reflect on how to build and maintain significant, deep and God honouring relationships. But probably the biggest challenge comes today to those of us who are married.

Ephesians 5 v 22-24, Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Now I don’t feel qualified to talk about how a wife should love her husband – so I’ve asked my wife, Lisa, to talk to you ladies!

When Ian first asked me to do this talk a few weeks ago, my first response was a panicked “No!”. In fact, my actual words were something along the lines of... “You’re freaking me out now. You’re not serious are you?” Since then, however, I’ve been mulling the whole thing over, and have come to the conclusion that in many ways, I’ve been preparing for this for a very long time. The subject of what it means to be a godly wife is one that is very close to my heart, and it’s a personal journey that I’ve been on for nearly two years now.

I believe with all my heart that the things that I have been learning have the power not only to deepen and strengthen a marriage, but to turn an ailing marriage around. I guess that is what has propelled me up here today. Before I go any further, I need you to understand that I don't personally have this all tied up. I get it badly wrong as often as I get it right. So I'm speaking to you as a fellow traveller along this road.

As women, we are fed so many messages today. On TV, in the books and magazines we read, and in the conversations we have with each other... We can have it all. We deserve it all. It's up to me to look after my needs, my ambitions and my desires. And my husband had better fall in, and be everything that I want, because I'm worth it. How much do we buy into popular thinking about what a husband, or a wife should be? Our gut reactions to Ephesians 5, vs 22-24 will probably tell us.

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

That word – “submit” – is anathema to the modern-day woman. Isn't it? I looked it up in the dictionary... “To surrender oneself to the control or authority of another; to cease to resist or oppose.” It goes against everything we've been taught to believe about ourselves. It represents utter weakness.

Or does it?

You see, I've come to believe with all my heart that a woman who has learned to submit, is a strong woman. Let me give you another definition of submit.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

John ch 15, vs 13

Or you could read it...

“Greater love has no wife than this, that she lay down her life for her husband.”

When I read those words along this journey, it struck me that “laying down your life” does not necessarily mean actually dying. But rather laying down *my* needs, *my* desires, and *my* rights, in order to serve another... in this case, my husband. Show me a wife who is putting that into practice, and I’ll show you a strong woman.

Now. At one level, we may totally agree with this. Of course we should love extravagantly and unconditionally, and seek to put our husbands first. Didn’t Jesus Himself do the same thing for us? But practically living this out, day after day, week after week, and year after year so easily trips us up. As I was preparing this, I read through some of my prayer diaries, and I found something I had written, “Unconditional love is not a natural Lisa-attribute.” I’d go so far as to say that it’s not a natural *anyone*-attribute. We’re not good at loving and serving and forgiving and persevering without some tangible reward in our sights. So we need help. From God, and from trusted Christian friends. In Colossians ch 3, vs 12,13, it says:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Every morning, before you’re thrust into another day of making packed lunches, doing the shopping, going out to work, ironing the clothes, tending the garden, helping with the homework, preparing the evening meal... pray that the Lord will clothe you in these things. Ask for a new wardrobe! Most of us don’t have these garments. But make your prayer daily – hourly if you’re going through a tough patch.

For the past 18 months, I’ve been meeting regularly with two other women. We pray for ourselves as wives, and we pray for our husbands and children. That is always the focus of our prayers. I have found immense strength and encouragement from that. I would encourage all of you women to do the same. Find women you can trust, and commit to pray for one another in your marriages.

What I’ve realised as I’ve prepared this is that there are about a trillion and one things I could say on this subject. There are so many facets to it. Whether it’s adjusting our expectations, respecting our husbands, creating a warm and welcoming home, learning to shut up and pray, what it means to be faithful – the list goes on. But there is one thing I want to dwell on for a moment.

What happens if we don't feel like our husbands deserve our love, our service, our kindness, our patience, and our forgiveness today? What if he has really wound me up, crossed the line, or hurt me, and I am utterly convinced that he is in the wrong? And maybe he is. Now, there are clearly occasions when issues need to be addressed and brought out into the open; submission doesn't turn us into doormats. But that's not something that we're going to explore today. Because I wonder if standing up for our "rights" is the easier path, the one that comes most naturally to us; whilst continuing to love, continuing to serve, continuing to show patience, continuing to show kindness and continuing to forgive are the harder path, but ultimately the one which yields the best results.

I have a favourite verse that's come out of my personal journey. It's from 1 Peter ch 4, vs 8.

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

If you like, this verse has given me the permission to lay down old bitterness and resentments, because it tells me that my husband does not have to be perfect in order for me to love him in the way God intended. It allows me to let go of a whole cartload of stuff, and to focus and celebrate all that is good about him – and there's plenty! – instead of those things that bother me. And there is such freedom in that. Because as women, we're good at letting a bitter root take hold of our hearts, aren't we? Being wives and mothers can be a tough road, and it's easy to build up resentment at the demands placed on us. That resentment is a heavy load to bear, and it twists us and makes us unattractive. But 1 Peter ch 4, vs 8 says that love – the kind that comes from God and is available for us to receive, in order to give out – covers over a multitude of sins. In other words, my husband doesn't necessarily have to say sorry, or even change for me to keep on loving.

I heard a story once, about a couple who had been married for 60 years. When a reporter asked the wife the secret to her long and happy marriage, she replied, "Well dear. On our wedding day, I wrote a list of ten things about my husband that bothered me, and I vowed on that day, that I would overlook those things. Whenever my husband did something to upset me over the years, I would say to myself, 'Well. Lucky for you, that was on my list'." That story is a wonderful illustration of grace in a marriage.

I want to finish with a couple of verses that should encourage you in your journey to become a godly wife.

“Love never fails.” I Corinthians, ch 13, vs 8a.

Three little words. Big message. There are times when loving feels too hard, and we wonder if we can carry on doing it in an unconditional manner. Or we wonder if we can even start, because we’ve been hurt before. No matter how tough it gets, remember that conducting yourself in this manner will not fail.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Galatians ch 6, vs 9

I don’t really need to add to that, do I? Don’t give up. Keep going. It’s really worth it.

Thanks Lisa.

Ok guys ready?

Ephesians 5 v 25 -33: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leaves his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”

According to Good Housekeeping this is: “How to be a good wife!” from 1955 Good Housekeeping!
(Published in the Daily Mail on 5th March 2008)

- Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return.
- Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you’ll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking.
- Be happy to see him. Great him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him.

- Your goal: Try to make sure your home a place of peace, order and tranquillity where your husband can renew himself in body and spirit.
- Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day.
- Catering for his comfort will provide you with immense personal satisfaction.

We may laugh – and we may joke about the perfect wife, but it seems to me that the person our wife will become mostly depends on us guys. Paul says that we are to love our wives as Christ loved the church. That is a profound, deep and powerful statement. Guys – how are you doing? In a nutshell it means that we must love our wives with sacrificial love. Christ's sacrificial love led him to the cross – but it was so that we could become all that God intended us to be. Christ's love sets an example and in marriage our role is to release our wives to live life fully and blossom to their full potential. Sacrificial love means we become a servant and serving isn't something we do – it is who we are. Guys – who are you in your marriage?

An illustration I read might be helpful. Look at this candy cane. It has two distinct colours, woven together to become one. Red is the dominant colour, but it makes room in equal measure for the white. In marriage two people become one, but the two colours both distinct, are intertwined and expressed together. The man must yield and sacrifice his rights as the dominant colour so that her gifts, and all that she is might be can be expressed in her own distinctive way.

Guys – how are you living in your marriage so that your wife can become all that God intended her to be? To love her means to make room for her. Guys – this is a choice. We must choose to love like this. Now – here are some challenges I hope will be helpful in helping us love our wives in this way.

Firstly – on a scale of 0 – 10 (where 10 is the greatest) how much do you pray for your wife to become all that she can be? Guys – if you love her, you will pray for her.

On a scale from 0 -10, how much are you prepared to sacrifice your rights for her? I know we work hard all week and we have the right to go and play golf on Saturday, Sunday it is the least we deserve. Guys – how much do you do what pleases you? To love is to give away our rights. How much do you love your wife?

Everything I've read, and my own experience would lead me to believe, that one of the best gifts husbands can give their wives is time. They want to be with us! We spend all sorts of ways of avoiding it – work ..."I can't let the guys down..." We have perhaps fooled ourselves with the idea that it's not time that matters – but quality time. Here's the truth – quality time only comes when you spend time on it! How are you loving your wife?

On a scale of 0 – 10 how much do you honour and encourage her gifts, abilities and interests? How much do you know who your wife is? Guys, if we are to love like Christ, we must make room for what

God places on her heart. It will be us and our effort to do that, that frees her to become all that God has made her.

On a scale from 0 – 10 how much do you love your wife for who she is today, rather than who you would like her to be? My best guess is your wife is not perfect! Lisa has a fridge magnet on which is written: “I know I’m not perfect, but I’m so close it scares me!” I wish – really this is a serious point – it were true! Because, if I love her as Christ loved the church I will be the one helping her in her weakness and I will have the privilege and the honour of watching her grow to perfection! Everything in Lisa that is different to me – is a challenge from God for me to grow! Together – an ordinary couple – we can be transformed into the extraordinary people God so longs us to be. Guys – the challenge is: love your wife for who she is today, not for what you want her to be.

There is so much more that could be said to us guys, but finally today I want to say this to you: how we are in our marriages is spiritually deeply, deeply significant. It is for our wives, for our children and for ourselves. And today I want to encourage you to put a marker down that says – it starts today! Today I will make the choice to love my wife as Christ loved the church. I will stop doing things that I know to be wrong, or unhelpful, or selfish. I will take my responsibility before God seriously and I will do this willingly! I Will:

- Pray for her regularly
- Choose to sacrifice my rights for her sake
- Give her my time
- Encourage her gifts, abilities and interests and free her to be herself
- Love her for who she is today

You may need some help – I do and I seek it regularly. There are guys here who today will talk with you or pray with you. I have said it before and I say it now as a married man, trying but often failing to love my wife and my family, that I want to be part of church where marriages are strong. Guys – the truth is, it is primarily our responsibility so let’s make it happen.

Preached by Ian Phillips at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 6th April 2008