

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Intro. Guests.

B. ? and I have been married for ? years. And, though this may surprise you, we're still learning what it looks like to have a good marriage. And for that matter, I'm ? year old and have friends for most of my life. And I am still learning what it looks like to be a good friend. Today we start a new series – a four-week look at God's advice on relationships called "We Are Family. It turns out that some of the advice /god offers about relationships is different from a lot of the advice in circulation right now. In today's message, Mike is going to lay out seven ideas that will shape this series and should shape how we live and interact with others.

II. Intro

A. I'm excited to start this new series. It's called "We are Family" and it's about relationships. The title is meant to advertise that this is not simply a marriage series. It's also a play on both the Sisters Sledge song from the late 70s, and the fact that we are a family – that God uses family language to describe the church.

1. God celebrates the family – indeed, we are instructed to care for those we are biologically related to.¹ But Jesus notably redefines the family as those who do the will of the father.²

2. I want to lean into that to have the kind of conversation families are supposed to have but often do not.

B. In this series:

1. I want to pull together God's counsel for those who are: single, married, single again, dating and not dating, living together, married with children, married without, widowed, grandparents, blended families and those I've not managed to list in that list.

2. I want to say the things that are not being said.³ There is a lot of advice out there. Relationships is one of the places where lots of people get hurt. So, not so surprisingly, there is lots of advice out there. In preparation for this series I read a lot of it – books, blogs and columns in all kinds of publications.

a) Some of it was helpful. And some of it struck me as shockingly bad. I found myself thinking, "Wow, has that advice ever worked anywhere?"

b) I held some focus groups, asking people questions about relationships and what they see changing and what they now know that they wished they knew earlier.

3. Of course, I get input like this without really seeking it. When people find out that I am pastor, most back up like I'm radio-active. But some do the opposite – they immediately start sharing intimate details about their life, often leaving me to want to say two things:

(1) "I wouldn't share that information... with many people, and not in line at Starbucks where others might hear."

(2) And, “You don’t have to say more. I think I know where this is going. Because it’s obvious isn’t it. I mean, you knew that what you were doing wasn’t going to work, right? You knew the decisions you were making were going to lead you to crash, right? You knew it was a bad idea, right? You know what men are like, right? I mean, your Momma told you something, right?”

4. In this series, I want to share some insights that are perhaps not as well-known as they once were.

5. I want to provide hope that relationships can get better. Some of you have given up on your marriage or on marriage in general. I want to fight against that.

C. For the record, I have framed my comments with an awareness that:

1. Society is shifting – which can be good or bad. Somethings have needed to change. Some are eternal and shouldn’t. But a lot is.

a) We are reminded of how much things have changed by the cascading array of TV families, from the Dick Van Dyke show and Father Knows Best through the Simpsons and Modern Family. Society But there are eternal truths.

b) We are also reminded of that when we look at the stats:

(1) The average age at which people get married has been going up and up.

(2) The number of children being born has been going down and down.

(3) The number of single people in this country surpassed the number of married adults for the first time.

(a) In the 1960, about 75% of people over the age of 18 were married. Today it’s less than fifty and dropping.

(b) As of just recently, the common place for people 18-34 to now live is... with their parents⁴

(c) And, whereas I used to talk with singles who wished they were married, in my research for this series I found myself talking with singles who were glad they were single.

(4) Divorce rates today are down a bit in the last few years, but twice what they were in the 60s.

(5) Living together before marriage is now viewed by many as the mature and sensible thing to do.

c) There are other changes

(1) Pornography has become ubiquitous.

(2) Legal definitions of marriage have shaken things up.

d) I came at this aware that many things are changing – was a bit surprised at how much had changed, but was aware of that. And I also came at my study with the conviction that that some things – such as the human condition or God’s counsel – have not.

2. I have framed my comments from an understanding that both marriage and singleness are good options.

a) Some of you think Chris Rock is right when he says, “You really only have two options: single and lonely or married and bored.” No.

b) Some people think that most marriages are unhappy – “Hey, if fifty percent of people get divorced and not everyone who is miserable ends their marriage – some grit their teeth and soldier on – then most marriages are unhappy. Not true:

(1) Yes, 50% of people who get married get divorced, but many of those who do get divorced got married before they turned 18. If you wait until you graduate from college the number goes way down. And if you wait to have sex until after you are married the number goes down even further.

(2) And two-thirds of unhappy marriage today will be happy marriages in five years if the couple stays together

(3) And 62 percent of those who have been married over forty years report being very happy.

(4) And married people have greater emotional and physical health and greater wealth.

D. A few other quick set-up comments

1. I am aware that not everything I say applies equally to everyone. Some of you are in your nineties and have been married to the same person for sixty years, some of you are 12 and have never been married and some of you are divorced or in a blended family or are living together or whatever. Whatever your situation I’d ask that you pay attention, noting that you have friends in every camp, and that your status today is likely to change. If you are married or single or have kids at home or whatever, your status will likely change.

2. Or noting that some of what I will say will likely hurt, or make you mad. Hurting you is not my intention. But neither is not hurting you.

3. Finally, let me note that you may need help interpreting this sermon to your situation. Some of you are in abusive situations, and those who know details are much better situated than I am in a sermon to speak into your life. I am praying that small groups step up here and that what I am saying fosters some rich, helpful, transformative discussions.

4. Finally, I want to keep this real. You need to know, Sheri and I do not have the perfect marriage or perfect family.

a) I am very fortunate and very thankful to be married to her. But no one who knows us well would think our marriage has been easy. We got married young and at least one of us had some rough edges to knock off.

b) I’ve talked about this before – noting that on a half dozen occasions we have gone to see a therapist saying, “We’re stuck.” And the first time I went in with the attitude, ‘Would you fix her?’ only to come away going, “My fault? Really? Wow.”

c) I am very thankful that we approached marriage with a dogged determination to make it work, and that we have found that over time both life and marriage have gotten easier and better and love grows stronger.

5. On a related topic. We do not have a perfect family. We've been very fortunate to have three great kids. But we have not been perfect parents.

a) The other day my oldest son sent me a note explaining that he had been playing around with an old computer that had crashed and he got it up and running. And he wrote to say, "Here are some old files you might want." And then he said, "check out, 'Letter to Austin. Good times.'"

b) And I did. And it contained a letter I wrote to him ten years ago when we were about to kill each other. He was applying to college, or he was not actually adhering to any sort of sensible approach to applying to college. I was pushing. The more I pushed the more he resisted. It got quite ugly before another family stepped in to help. After it was all over, Sheri sat Austin and me down and said, "We all have reasons to be ashamed at how we have acted. I am not going through this again."

c) I'm not sure what she had to be embarrassed about, but I share that to say, "I'm not sure what allusions you are under about what our lives look like." We live in the real world with real challenges. We are not perfect. No one is.⁵

6. I share all of that to say, I am not approaching this from the perspective of "You need to do as we have done." Other than to say, "We're doing our best to follow the insight we find coming from God, and it does work."

III. So, to get this series started I want to set seven things in front of you today. They are basic assumptions, but they may surprise you and since I am going to build on them, I wanted to state them clearly.

A. Number one: You were made for relationships.

1. We were made in the image of God who has never been alone. We cannot understand the mysteries of the Trinity – one God in three persons. It's beyond us. But there are things we know about it. We know that God has never been alone. He has always existed in the company of himself. And we know that as people made in his image – we were also designed for relationships, both with God and with others.

2. The Genesis account reinforces this. There we read that God saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone.

3. We also know this from life. Solitary confinement is one of the things prisoners fear the most. I know, some of you – especially Moms with three kids under the age of four – are thinking, "if I committed a crime they would lock me up by myself. Really? What crime do I have to commit? I'm desperate for some me time. Seriously, what do I have to do." I get that some of you do not get enough alone time. But alone time can be hard. You end up talking to Volleyballs.

4. I am not saying that we need to be married to be complete. We do not. Jesus was not married and he was perfect. In fact, though he celebrated the family, he elevated being single. As did Paul. In I Cor., Paul is on record saying, “being single is better.”

a) This does not mean that being single means you are automatically better or more spiritually mature. More on this later. Right now, all I am saying is”: we were made for relationships. That doesn’t require marriage. But we are wired for relationships.

B. Number two: Sin messes things up. We were made for relationships, but sin messes them up and makes them hard.

1. The first place where we see trouble is in our relationship with God – the vertical axis. We were made to be in a gracious, loving, life-giving, safe, fulfilling relationship with God. One in which we felt loved and secure for eternity. One that frees us up to be giving and gracious ourselves. Sin makes a mess of that. And as a result we make a mess of everything else. Principally, we make a mess of our relationships with each other – the horizontal axis. If we were perfect, relationships would be easy. We are not and consequently, they are not. The history of humanity is the history of strife, war, injustice and worse.

2. Part of the problem is that we are broken in ways that make us unable to see how broken we are. One of the ways sin damages us is that it leaves us unable to see how damaged we are. We end up deeply self-deceived.

a) We see this in Genesis 3: Adam messes up and then proceeds to blame both God and Eve for the things he did wrong.

b) Over the last few weeks I have been working with someone who appears constitutionally unable to acknowledge that they may not be perfect.

3. So, sin messes up relationships. Selfish people use people and hurt people hurt people. There are problems everywhere.

C. Number Three: Our relationships shape us spiritually. In fact, the people we spend time with influence us spiritually more than just about anything else.

1. We become like the people we spend time with. We understand this as it relates to kids. We don’t want sweet little Johnny playing with the kid across the street because the kid across the street is a “bad influence.” (Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe sweet little Johnny is the trouble. Whatever, we understand that friends shape behavior).

2. It’s true – which is why I have written and said a lot about friends. It’s hard to be better than our friends.

D. Number Four: Relationships between men and women can be are uniquely complicated

1. Horizontal relationships are hard, relationships between the sexes are often harder still because of sex – which, on the one hand is very simple. On the other hand is enormously complicated. Let me call a quick time out to say: God is pro-sex. Some think he is a prude. Not at all. The whole thing was his idea. He is the one who wired us for pleasure; one of the books of the Bible is an erotic love poem.⁶

2. Secondly, you have the whole, men are from Mars and Women are from Venus thing. When we were dating, Sheri and I thought we saw the world the same way. And this made sense to us because we had so many things in common: our dads were both engineers who golfed; we came from larger families; we had both been very active in college ministries and wanted to invest more time doing that. And then we got married and we'd up looking at each other and saying, "You think what? How in the world could you see that that way?"

E. Number Five: There is a lot of confusion in discussions about marriage, in part because, when people use the word they often mean very different things.

1. For starters, family and marriage have changed over time. I'm not thinking about changes since Supreme Court legalized same sex marriage. I am thinking about changes way before that. The families we read about in the Old Testament were, for the most part, extended, patriarchal families that operated differently than the nuclear family of today. Some marriages are arranged and are all about property. Other marriages are all about romance and making people happy. In Eastern cultures, you submit your views to the group or family. In the post-Enlightenment West, the individual comes before the group. 100 years ago, people married in teens and started having children, because kids were an economic aid. Birth control was not available, so a woman might have 14 plus pregnancies and die in child birth. So, people mean very different things when they use the word marriage.

2. For the record, God means something very specific when He uses it. For starters, in God's eyes, marriage is more than marriage. It is an earthly demonstration of a heavenly reality – the marriage of Jesus with the church. It's a chance to display the radical fidelity between Christ and his bride, the church.

a) In Eph. 5:32 the apostle Paul writes about marriage. It's a famous passage – disliked by many. Let me read it to you:

(1) Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(2) ²²Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

(3) ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing^[b] her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”^[c] ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

b) It’s the last verse I want to highlight. He sure seems to be talking about a marriage between a husband and a wife when all the sudden he says: this is all a mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church.

c) We think this is weird. I did. I thought comparing the relationship between Jesus and the church to marriage was weird. But, in light of eternity, I think we will end up thinking that comparing the marriage of two people to the marriage between Jesus and the church is weird.

d) We need to understand, the vows we make in marriage are designed to reflect the shape of the Gospel. We are enacting the Gospel by dying to self and living for another. We are entering a covenant not a contract

(1) In a contract things are more consumer based. It’s sort of like your relationship with your grocer. If they have good produce at a low price, you keep coming back. If not, you go somewhere else because your needs are more important than the relationship.

(2) In a covenant this is something much more like having a child. You do not say, “you’re really winy. I’m moving on. “ If you do you go to jail.

3. There is more to say here, but let me go on.

F. Number Six: Marriage today suffers from impossible expectations

1. As I already noted, the number of people who marry is in sharp decline. There are a few reasons. One is because many have uncoupled sex from marriage. People used to get married in order to have sex. In most settings, sex is available outside of marriage.

2. A second reason many do not marry is because they can’t find the right person. The bar is so high. Everyone is looking for their soulmate – the person who will love them perfectly and complete them and not try to change them. This is unrealistic. It reflects a naïve view of human life and sin. And it creates an unattainable standard in a mate.

3. I will talk more about this next week. For now let me say, I’m not a fan of the soulmate language. What we find in the Bible is a lot more focus on becoming the right person than finding the right person.

- G. Number Seven: God's Ideas are counter-intuitive, but they work.
1. I'll say more about this on week three, my point is, a great marriage doesn't look a lot like what a lot of people think it should – at least not at first.
 2. And, that means the kind of advice that works to lead you where you want to go is different than you think. We are going to find some very odd counsel in the Bible. Such as, you win by losing. The way up is down. It's to submit.
 - a) I used to be I embarrassed by what Paul said about marriage – in particular his call to wives to submit. But I just didn't understand what he was saying. For starters, it's wives submit and husband die for your wife. But this is counsel for strong people to follow.
 3. God's counsel is shaped by reality. And it works. And when I say, it works, I mean, it works for broken people like us. I've been a pastor for 30 plus years. The advantage of that is, I'm not naïve. I don't know your story or secret – nor am I asking to know - but I know that this room is full of people struggling with drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse, pornography and anger. I know that we have victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. I know that there is a lot of fear and a lot of secrets.
 4. The good news is, there are ways forward. Let me be clear, sin holds you back – spiritually and in other ways. And secret sins have more power than they should. But there are ways forward. God's ideas for relationships are often counter-intuitive, but they work.

¹ I Timothy 5:8

² Luke 8:21

³ Among the other things I set out to do was to give a series of sermons I could not have given when I was in my 30s or even 40s.

⁴ Terry P. Jeffrey, "Census: More Americans 18-to-34 Now Live with Parents Than With Spouse," April 19, 2017 | 4:36 PM EDT

⁵ In his book, *Marriage*, Tim Keller opens with a similar disclaimer, briefly mentioning the about the wedding plate story, in which he came home to find his wife breaking their wedding china. (She had only broken one plate and it was chipped, and she did it to get his attention. But it makes for a great story. She had a hammer and was pounding on a plate. When he asked, "What are you doing?" She said, "Well, given the way you are acting, there isn't much of a reason to keep these.")

⁶ Some think that it's not about the relationship between a man and woman, but about God and his people. In either case, God uses explicit sexual imagery in His book. (English translators tone it down. At the time of Christ, single men were often not allowed to read the Song of Solomon).