

I. Intro

A. Not long ago I met a guy a guy who works in the financial world. He uses the latest and fastest technology to take advantage of fractional differences in currency prices, making thousands of trades per second. He told me that he doesn't care if the market is up or down, he just wants movement.

B. Well, by those standards, I had a successful week. It feels like I got lots of movement last week - I got a lot of calls and emails about last week's sermon. Some from people who liked it. And some from people wanting to run me out of town.

C. For what it's worth, I try not to pay much attention to my polling numbers. When I do, Sheri reminds me that I am not running for Homecoming King. And feedback on last week's sermon doesn't surprise me. I expected it. And I expect more over the next two weeks. So let me say, "If I say something that is helpful and you want to send me an email, great. And if I say something that makes you mad, or if you think I need to be tar and feathered, or fired or have my head examined. Feel free to call.... Syler or Anson or Aaron or Dan or Allison or Brad or, anyone else.

II. So far I've argued:

A. That relationships matter. We were made for them – we were created for good relationships with God and others. And when we have them, we do better. Good relationships with good people help us in good ways. And, correspondingly, bad relationships, or relationships with bad people, or no relationships make living a good life harder. The point is, we seldom are better than our key relationships. People push us forward or hold us back.

B. Second: relationships are hard because of our sin. In this broken world, the default setting is hard. Left unattended, relationships break down. We must invest, sacrifice and work at them or they unravel. Disney movies suggest that after the prince and princess find each other – they live happily ever after. The new language about "soul mates" promises similar outcomes. That's not real life. Real relationships take work. They have to be developed and maintained. It helps to know this, especially going into marriage.

C. Three: Whatever else other people mean by the word marriage – and there are lots of models and understandings out there – God uses the term to describe a covenant relationship based on unconditional love and modeled after Christ's love for us. Marriage was God's idea. It is not something concocted during the Bronze Age to manage property rights. Nor is it whatever we decide it is. God has something quite specific in mind when it comes to marriage. Something where both the husband and the wife get to play the Jesus role - in submission and sacrifice.

D. Four: the goal is not to find the right person but to become the right person. If you are single and looking – and you do not have to be. (Being single is a god-ordained option. It's the one Paul recommends). But if you are single and want to be married, the goal is to become the kind of person the person you are looking for is looking for. And if you are married, your assignment is to become the kind of person the person you are married to can love, trust and respect.

E. I have said other things

1. I've talked about the fact that our marriage – Sheri's and mine - is not perfect. I have not been a perfect husband.
2. I've talked about the need to trust God's counsel because He is God and He is for us. His advice is for our best.
3. I shared that sex outside of marriage is a bad idea. Not because God is a prude. But because it is a fragile fire and so he created boundaries where it is safe.
4. I also noted that while living together is an understandable response to a fifty percent divorce rate, studies show that it does not help us test-drive marriage, because we can only know what marriage is like if we close the back door.

F. Finally, last week I ended by noting that we all have relational baggage. We've all made mistakes. Done stupid things. Been selfish. Hurt those we love. But we can bring that to Jesus. Sometimes we dig ourselves a deep hole. It can take time to dig out. But the good news is, we can be forgiven right away and start moving in the right direction.

III. Today I want to share a few points I find myself making over and over.

- A. I want to pass along a few insights based on what I've learned from Bible study, 32 years of marriage and just a bit less time than that as a pastor. Which is another way of saying, most of these are things I've picked up from the mistakes I've made or observed.
- B. Some may strike you as simplistic. Maybe they are. But there is a simple on the other side of complex that is actually profound.

IV. Number one: the best thing you can do for your spouse is love God. The best thing you can do for your spouse, or your friend, your kids, your parents – anyone, including yourself – the best thing you can do is love God.

A. You may have heard the dictum: the best thing you can do for your kids is to love their mother (or father). Which is true. Some families become kid-centric. Mothers, in particular, end up giving all their time and attention to the children, leaving their spouse feeling forgotten or jealous.¹ Well, this is a play on that. The best thing you can do for your spouse is, love God.

B. This point is designed to address the challenge I once heard defined as “two ticks and no dog.” If you have one dog and one tick, it works. The tick is happy and the dog is no worse for the wear. But if you have two ticks and no dog you've got trouble.

C. Let me recast this, if both husband and wife are making more withdrawals than deposits, the relationship breaks down. The solution is, we need to fill our tank with God. I go back to a passage that has captivated me for most of the last two years. It's found in I Samuel 30, and it reads, “David encouraged himself in the Lord.”

1. David had been leading a band of renegades. They had a particularly disastrous day. Everyone was devastated by the setbacks they'd suffered and it looked like they were going to turn on David, who was also down.
2. And then we read, “David encouraged himself in the Lord.” And he was able to pull things together and turn things around.
3. We need to learn to do that. We need a relationship with God that gives us energy and hope and joy and allows us to live from that platform. When that is true, we can take hits from life without taking shots at anyone else.

4. This is a win-win. Please remember, spiritual growth is its own reward. Life works better for us when we are kinder and more loving and patient. And more fully embrace the I Cor. 13 qualities we looked at last week.

D. A second reason loving God is one of the best things you can do for your marriage is because it allows the Holy Spirit to convict us, and gets our spouse out of that role.

1. One of the challenges in many relationships is that the only person offering constructive criticism is the spouse – who is the one likely taking the hit of your sin. Which, by the way, is often what the problem is. Occasionally you have a marriage problem. But often what you have is a sin problem that becomes a marriage problem because your sin – your selfishness – is hurting the other person. And they are the only ones who can call foul, which turns them into a nag.

2. If you have power or money – as many of you do – this is even more of a danger because it's unlikely that anyone else is telling you what a jerk you are being. Good friends would help. But the best way forward is a growing relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is brilliant here.

3. Last week Sheri and I had a “marital discussion.” There are times when being married is easy and fun and there are times when easy or fun are not the words you would use to describe it. This was one of the second times. We got sideways. And we talked it out a bit. The Bible says, “don't let the sun go down on your anger.” We try to adhere to that. The next morning, with a bit of distance from the discussion, I saw that this was on me.

a) The bad news is, I was dense enough not to see it the night before.

b) The good news is, about as soon as I started to pray I thought, “Idiot. You were an idiot. This was on you.” And so, that morning I apologized and Sheri offered a creative solution.

4. My point is not that we fight. My point is, conviction came from God. One of the best things we can do for every relationship we have, is to grow in the image and likeness of Jesus. A good, growing relationship with God:

a) Makes us better people. Easier to be around.

b) And it gives us the energy to give when that is what is required. There are times when your spouse – or your friend – is going to be sub optimal. They are going to need to make withdrawals not deposits. Hey, you signed up for that. It's great if God has filled your tank. You can be the dog not the tick!

5. One of the very best things you can do for your spouse is love God.²

V. Second, let me share the advice I occasionally share behind closed doors because it's not very politically correct.

A. In fact, I often say, “This isn't the most politically correct advice you're going to hear. But I believe it's true and I think it might just help.” I start by rehearsing my belief that men and women are equal and a lot alike, but not the same. I think gender matters. And I'm struck by the differences in counsel that are given to men and women when it comes to relating to each other.

B. Wives, let me start by offering you a little secret about men. I suspect you've figured it out, but it's not something that men will often admit to. But it's true. A lot of the confidence is a mask for fear.

1. As a boy, one of the first things you learn on the playground is, if you show weakness, you'll get creamed. There is a pecking order among males that gets reinforced a hundred different times a day. You see it often, but I'm convinced you do not see it as often as it's in play. As opposed to men, women tend to be more cooperative than competitive. If a man isn't fighting to be first, he is likely fighting to not be last. And that means it's bad form to admit fear and weakness.

2. Sociologists observe this orientation in the games little boys play, that generally all have winners and losers.

a) When little boys play they spend a lot of time fighting over the rules or over who won. And if they are better than their playmate at something, they point it out. "I'm faster than you. My glove is newer than yours or my dad can beat up your dad."

b) When little girls play, nearly 100 percent of the things they say are words or attempts at words (as opposed to boys who spend a lot of time making the sounds of guns, bombs and trucks). They spend a lot more time looking at each other and they play games without winners and losers. And if they do get in a fight it's over who is who's best friend.

3. After thirty years in men's ministry I will say, we've only occasionally been successful in getting men to drop their mask. We got that for a bit at Men's Fraternity. But it's hard to keep a setting where admitting fear is safe.

4. So here's why I am saying this: wives, please note that in I Peter 3, the counsel you get is to respect and honor your husbands. Husbands are told to love their wives. It's not that wives do not deserve honor and respect or that husbands do not need love, but a man desperately wants to be affirmed. What I hear most from men is, "No matter how hard I try it's not enough."

C. Let me flip this around and talk to men about women. The point is close but plays out a bit differently. We're still in I Peter 3 – and it's still all politically incorrect stuff. What Peter writes to men is:

1. Men, live with your wives in an understanding way – that is, according to the instruction from God, which if you study I Peter you see, means, as your equal. The view of women in the 1st century Roman world was not as equals. Women were decidedly second class. Jesus elevates their status. In this passage, Peter argues that wives are "co-heirs" of the grace of life. And says, "if you treat your wife poorly, your prayers will not be answered."

2. But the text reads, "Men, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel.

3. There is a lot of study on this passage. A lot of analysis of the Greek and unpacking and second-guessing of Peter. I wrote a paper on this thirty-five years ago. I went back and read it last week. The terms used in the Greek do not suggest that weaker means less than. My initial take-away was that it suggested women were more emotionally alert – which can have downsides. It means they are more subject to pain. I'm now more inclined to think it's more focused on physically weaker – which was a bigger deal 2,000 years ago.

4. Today, the fact that most men are bigger and stronger than most women doesn't mean much. There is very little in my day where being physically stronger matters. Back then it did.

5. Look, the debate over this will continue. But here is my take-away. Set I Peter 3 aside and go to Ephesians 5. What I say to men when they are reporting that it's not fair and they can't keep going and they are doing way more than their share of the work is, it's your job to suffer first."

6. I say, however you want to read I Peter 3, you are called upon to be the strong one. You should be the first to suffer. That's your job. Christ died for the church. Love. Honor. Value. Protect. Pay attention to.

D. Let me move on. My final point today.

VI. Point three: You win by losing. This is an ancillary to point two.

A. A quick time out. If you are married to an abuser, this advice is unlikely to work. Most of you are not. You are married to a sinner. We live in a world where you can get written up for a micro-aggression. There is abuse inflation out there. Most of us are married to a normal people who are selfish and far from perfect. Again, this is a reason why we need good friends who can look on and help us understand what's normal and what is not. Most of us are married to sinners, but not abusers. If you are most people, this advice is for you. The advice is this: you win by losing.

B. If you can let the other person have their way, let them have their way. Life works best for everyone, if you are more concerned that your spouse or friend is happy than you are, everyone wins!

C. This is both relationship 101 and a profound spiritual truth, most evidently on display in with Jesus and most prominently celebrated in Phil. 2. Let me read you this passage. It is profound theology. It's perhaps the oldest hymn we have. There are lots of reasons to study this. I want you to hear it as relationship advice. Philippians 2:5:

1. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

D. God lifts up those who step down.

E. Step down. Serve. Let Jesus be your relational guide.

VII. Communion

¹ In their book on marriage, called The Meaning of Marriage – which I highly recommend - Tim and Kathy Keller talk about how, when their kids were little, she got all of her “skin hunger needs” – a term I was not familiar with but which made great sense right away – she got all her skin-hunger needs met by the kids. He didn’t and it led to issues until they figured it out. The kids were getting all her hugs and affection. Meanwhile, she was stiff arming him. The point being, the kids do better if their parents’ marriage is strong. That may be a bit counter intuitive. But I think we get it. What I am saying here is similar but different. My point is: one of the very best things you can do for your spouse is to love God. There are at least two reasons:

² By the way, lots of other traditional cultures have a view of marriage that is similar to those found in Christianity. In specific, they are based on a pledge – not on feelings. But in the end, Christianity does something the others cannot. It answers the question, where do you get the power to love someone when you do not feel like it or when you realize how bad you are. That’s when you go to Jesus and realize that he stayed on the cross. He doesn’t love us because we are lovely. He loves us to make us lovely. And I can rest and relax in him. I do not have to worry or fear about how this will play out. It ends well. I am secure in Christ.