

“Everlasting Love”

I Corinthians 13:7

Series: Love Comes to Town Week 7 Making Love Last Forever

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It is perhaps the most romantic bridge in the world. Spanning the River Seine, nestled between the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre and Notre Dame, the Pont des Artes is a footbridge at the heart of Paris. What better place could there be for two people to declare their endless love? And what better way to seal that love than with a lock. Since 2008, couples write or engrave their names on a lock, connect it to the bridge railing, kiss, and then throw away the key in the Seine. It's their way of telling the world, "Our love is secure, sure, endless, locked in." How sweet.

There's just one problem: all those lock ups are causing a bridge breakdown. After 7 years there were 700,000 locks. City workers started cutting them off. New ones appeared. By June 2015 there were one million locks on the Pont des Artes weighing 45 tons. The city of Paris initiated a "Love without Locks" Campaign stating, "Our bridges can't stand your love. Set them free." Now it's illegal. So, if you try to declare your love in the City of Love, you'll get locked up.

When you think about it: is a padlock the best symbol of love? Where do you use a padlock? On a smelly gym locker. Where do you usually lock someone up and throw away the key? In a dungeon. Recently, some lovers tried to keep their options open – they use a combination lock.

How do you have endless love? How do you live and give a love that never ends in your relationships: marriage, family, work, church, community and people in need? Remember the Self-Assessment of our relationships we did at the start of this series? Over the weeks, so many of you shared with me how God is helping you improve. You are speaking the truth with love. You are pausing before venting your anger. You make sacrifices and put the other person first. You open your eyes and love all neighbors by meeting their needs.

Though we've come to the end of our Love Comes to Town series, it's really the beginning. At the center of our core passage - I Corinthians 13 – are these simple, profound words: "Love never ends" (I Corinthians 13:8). How do you keep loving? Many marriages break up. Many siblings and parents sever ties and stop speaking. Many friendships fall apart. How do you keep practicing what you learned about love? How do you keep growing your love for others? How do you have an everlasting love?

Millions symbolize their endless love with a lock on a bridge. I prefer to use a different image: the bridge itself. All relationships are a bridge between two people. The strength and endurance of the bridge will depend on several crucial factors. Paul gives us four actions which establish and encourage a solid, secure bridge of long-lasting love between two people.

Love...always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. I Corinthians 13:7

Before we examine each one, remember: these are actions not feelings. There are times when you won't feel like doing these actions, but you do because of love. These are daily practices, not a one-time turn the lock and throw away the key.

The first is **Defend Each Other**. "Love always protects." The Greek word Paul uses here is *stego*. It means to protect, to preserve, to cover something, to keep off threats. Did you know a million love locks were not the first threat faced by the Pont des Artes. The bridge you walk on today is not the original. The first was built during the reign of Napoleon in 1804 and was bombed during the First and Second World Wars. There were also multiple collisions caused by boats and, in 1979, 200 feet of the bridge collapsed when a barge rammed it.

What attacks your relationship bridge? Outside demands and desires. If you give more time and attention to your career or your hobbies than your relationship with your spouse or children, it will weaken your relationship bridge. If you give your heart and affection to an affair or some other form of lust it will threaten your relationship bridge. Protect and defend this bridge against all outside demands and desires. I read these words at nearly every wedding:

Two are better than one ... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10.

During the Church Has Left the Building last week, my wife Lisa and I cleaned up an attic filled with hundreds of winter coats...and we are still married. Now I may be good with nuts and bolts, nails and hammers but I am useless when it comes to clothing. She organized all those outer garments while I squatted and held the bags. It was great to see it all cleaned up but by the end our thighs were burning from those thousands of squats. We had to help each other up off the floor.

When life knocks one of you down, the other needs to reach out a hand and lift up. The minister at our wedding said to us, "Protect and defend each other. Make your marriage the number one relationship in your life after your relationship with God." Stand up for each other. Speak up for each other. Help each other up. Don't let any outside distractions, demands or desires draw you apart. Love will not last if you don't defend the Bridge.

Second, **Depend on Each Other**. "Love always trusts." The one you love should defend you. But what if you need defending from the one who is supposed to love you? Where did Lisa and I bag all those coats? At A Woman's Place. For nearly half a century

A Women's Place provides support for anyone surviving domestic violence, their children and the community through a 24-hour hotline, emergency shelter, counseling, victim response advocacy, legal assistance, and prevention education.

We were moved by the stories of survivors whose lives were shattered by threats, abuse and violence. Trust is essential in every relationship. You cannot build a relationship bridge without it.

How do you build trust? Honesty and Reliability. Secrecy always kills a relationship. This is why people in recovery often say, "You are only as sick as your secrets." When we hide things from others – at home or work – doubt and suspicion create cracks in the support structure of your

relationship bridge. Honesty and transparency can heal and restore these supports. This is why we learned during this series the importance of “speaking the truth with love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Reliability is also essential. Do you keep your promise? Do you follow through? Do you show up and support? Can you be counted on? Honesty and Reliability make it possible for you to depend on each other. Love lasts only when there is trust. What can you do today to be more trustworthy?

Third, **Dream with Each Other**. “Love always hopes.” Often, when someone uses the word “hope” they really mean a “wish.” A wish is a desire for something better but you’re not sure it will happen. “I hope you’ll wash the dishes” “I hope you’ll do your homework.” “I hope you’ll stop snoring and pulling the covers off me.” In the Bible, hope is not a wish. It’s confidence. It’s certainty. Despite the deep darkness of night, you know the Sun will rise. Despite the power of sin, death and the devil, you know the Son has risen. This gives you hope for this life and the next. So many are discouraged by their relationships. They figure this is as good as it gets or things will only get worse. God wants to give you hope. God has a better dream for your relationship.

How do you start living God’s dream? It is essential for you to build a suspension bridge. Unlike other bridges supported from below, a suspension bridge is lifted from above. I tell every couple getting married they have a relationship with each other – the bridge – and a relationship with God. The closer they move toward God, the closer they will be to each. I then add that this is not magic. You won’t have a perfect marriage just by sitting in a church pew any more than you’ll have a perfect marriage because you put on a wedding worthy of Instagram. Getting closer to God means you do the things God wants you to do and love the way God loves you. When two people are willing to love Jesus’ way, they can build a better, stronger relationship bridge. When they put aside selfishness and secrecy, raging and sulking, when they give and forgive, when they listen, understand and speak the truth with love then God’s dream for their relationship starts to become a reality. Don’t give up on your relationship. There is hope. God has a better dream for you.

This does not just apply to marriages. All our relationships can be healthier, stronger, closer if we each draw nearer to God, if we practice loving each other God’s way. God has a dream for this world. It’s better than what we see out there now. This is why we do the Church Has Left the Building – to share God’s love and do our part to make God’s dream for this world come true. And you certainly did that last weekend:

- Served 400 meals, baked 832 cookies, and wrapped 4500 sets of utensils for TASK in Trenton.
- Worked on a house in Bristol and organized Restore for Habitat for Humanity.
- Cleaned a garage for a neighbor in need.
- Managed loads of donations for the United Way Help Center
- Sewed 32 pillowcases for children with cancer at Cases for Smiles
- Assembled 142 snack bags for homeless neighbors with Caring for Friends
- Wrote 300 cards to include in care packages for those in the military through A Soldier’s Hand
- Packed 100 boxes of fresh produce for families in the Trenton Housing Authority
- Assisted with organizing and administration at A Woman’s Place
- Prepared 24 dinners for the Deacons to serve our Woodside families in need.
- Performed fall yard work for several neighbors

- Planted memorial trees at the Garden of Reflection
- Organized a Food Pantry in Morrisville
- Created Kindness Bags and gave them to police and firefighters in Trenton.
- Served 108 bowls of chili and cornbread to homeless neighbors at the Trenton Rescue Mission.
- Over 35 Disciples from four churches did a Prayer Walk in 5 locations around Morrisville.

As one person said,

We gave out Love bags which contained a snack, a small pack of tissues, a gospel track, a Love bracelet, and a small New Testament. As we met people we asked if they wanted a Love Bag and a Prayer. Each one said, "Yes"! It was awesome. We all went away rejoicing in the Lord.

Let's catch God's dream for our relationships and this world! What can you do today to make God's dream for your relationships come true?

And the last key to lasting love is perhaps the toughest: **enDure with Each Other**. "Love always perseveres." The Greek word for "Persevere" is *hupomeno*. It literally means "to remain under" Picture someone carrying a heavy load and instead of throwing it off, they continue to bear it, to remain under it. Sometimes it's translated as patience or endurance. A situation is stressful, painful but instead of dropping it and running away, you stay, you carry it, you endure. I know many of you are enduring heavy burdens. You or someone in your life has an addiction, anxiety, autism or Alzheimer's, debt, depression, disease or drawing near to death. The burden is getting heavier, and you don't know how much longer you can endure.

Now is the time to turn to God and each other for help. Paul says,

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2 What is the law of Christ? Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. When you reach the breaking point, that you can't endure under the weight a moment longer, turn to God and reach out for help. Don't bear it alone. Talk with God, talk with me, talk with a fellow Woodside disciple, talk with a counselor. Ask for help. As my mother always said, "Many hands make light work."

I witness two powerful examples of this bridge of love this week. Recently two men passed away, Bill Hall, the husband of Karen Hall, and Richard Peterson, the husband of Phyllis Peterson and the father of Krista Oleynick. I met with each family separately on Wednesday to plan for the memorial services and to learn more about their lives. Both Bill and Dick suffered from a form of Parkinson's Disease which slowly, insidiously, stole away their strength, their balance, their ability to walk, relate and communicate. Both families recalled how the symptoms of the disease started slowly and subtly yet progressively grew over the last fifteen years. Together, they endured through all the challenges, the falls, the losses until the final day when God freed them being locked up by this affliction. And then one of the adult children at the meeting gave this testimony:

The way my mother cared for our father is the greatest example of the wedding vows: I will love you for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part.

Defend each other, Depend on each other, Dream with each other, EnDure with each other. That is the key that unlocks God's everlasting love.