



FIRST COMES LOVE, THEN COMES _____

HOW TO USE OUR MINISTRY PASS SERMON SERIES GUIDES

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

- This guide isn't a set of sermon manuscripts. While sermon manuscripts can be both useful and a powerful training tool, our sermon series guides are different. Rather than tell you what to say, our aim is for this material to spark your imagination, assist you in planning your sermon, and offer a boost to your study time.
- This guide isn't ironclad. While we hope you use our material, the pieces of this document are designed to be moved, tweaked, and altered. As you study the suggested passages, and pray through your message, this guide will hopefully be a launching pad, rather than a landing net.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

Included in each guide is:

- A sermon series outline that breaks up the teaching set into a specific number of weeks.
- A "big idea" of the series.
- A passage, "big idea" of the sermon, topic list, and a number of illustrations and talking point ideas are included in each weekly section. The "Sermon Ideas and Talking Points" area is filled with observations about the text, relevant applications, creative ideas, and illustrations.
- A small group discussion sheet (located in a separate document in this bundle).

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- Plan ahead. Our guides are best utilized in advance versus the day or night before. Read over the ideas and illustrations provided, thinking through how you can possibly utilize them in your message. We've purposely kept our guides simple so as to give you the best opportunity to create your own, unique message.
- While we give you a passage and "big idea" of the message, take time to study the text.
- Utilize the media contained in this bundle to promote and communicate your series message.

Note: Although we've worked hard to verify the accuracy of the material in this guide, we encourage all pastors to carefully review the information before sharing it with their congregation.



MINISTRY PASS



First Comes Love, Then Comes _____

Big Idea of the Series: This is a four-week sermon series about marriage. Each week looks at biblical principles for marriage that help foster a loving, Christ-centered relationship. First comes love, then comes sacrifice, gentleness, humility, and endurance.

Week 1

Text: Romans 12:1–9

Topics: Sacrifice, Love, Marriage

Big Idea of the Message: Love requires sacrifice.

Application Point: To be a living sacrifice, specifically in my marriage, means that I give of myself to unconditionally love and serve my spouse, even when it is inconvenient, complicated, and requires me to lay my selfishness on the altar.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. “Love, love, love, Love is all you need,” [sang The Beatles](#), but is that true? For many of us, love is not enough. Or perhaps our broken expressions of love, even the most earnest, aren’t enough. We often need love plus _____: love + therapy, love + communication, love + trust, love + _____. When God showed humanity love through the person of Jesus, love’s definition became something bigger than a pop song, rom-com, or novel could ever portray. It became real, active, and transformative. Love became sacrificial. Because of Jesus’s sacrifice for us, we as believers are to live our lives as a sacrifice as well. First comes love, then comes sacrifice.
2. Romans 12 begins with a strong call to the believer to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Considering all that God has done, we respond by offering our whole selves back to him in service (v. 1). All our relationships—including our marriages—will be most successful when God is calling the shots. When we have laid ourselves on the altar, we then live as people transformed, not conformed (v. 2). We don’t inflate our importance above another, and we don’t minimize the abilities God has given us. We think soberly, according to the faith

God has given us. Tim Keller notes that we don't define ourselves by the amount of faith we have. God did not provide some people with more faith than others. "The word 'measure' is the Greek word *metron* (from which we get 'meter'), and it most likely means a standard of measurement, not an amount. In other words, Paul is saying: *All of you have been given your saving faith in Christ crucified, and that is how you are to measure yourselves*. That means we need first of all to realize that we are *all the same*. ... God loves us equally in Christ" (Tim Keller, *Romans 8–16 for You* [Epsom, England: The Good Book Company, 2014], 92). This is why we don't act like we're better than anyone else (v. 3). We all have value and gifts to offer (vv. 4–8). Our love is not shallow or conditional when we live our lives submitted to God. It is genuine—the genuine [*agapē*](#) love of Christ (v. 9).

3. Jesus sacrificed his status, power, and life so we could experience genuine, unconditional love. He wasn't out to prove that he was better than anyone else. Our response is to sacrifice *our* desires for status, power, and self to him so that we can love God and others similarly. All our relationships require a certain amount of sacrifice because sacrifice is foundational to love. This doesn't mean we never say what we need or want; being a doormat isn't honoring to God or loving to the people in our lives. But it does mean a willingness to lay down our preferences sometimes for the good of the other. Marriage is not 50/50. It is not transactional: "If you do your part, I'll do mine." It's a relationship that requires 100/100. Both spouses must choose to give one hundred percent to each other. Will you be able to do that all the time? Nope. Struggle is universal. We aren't always at peak performance and don't always have the will, energy, or strength to give 100 percent. You or your spouse may have seasons when one person struggles with their mental health. Other times, trying to make ends meet will require one or both of you to spend more time working than connecting. If you have children, they will need more of you than you could ever know, and your spouse might get the short end of the stick. What does it mean to be a living sacrifice in those moments? Love is easy when everyone is at their best, but to love someone sacrificially implies that even in those seasons, you aren't withholding your love because your spouse isn't meeting your expectations, or that you take advantage of someone when you are feeling low. Thinking "soberly" means recognizing, empathizing, and responding with God's heart toward our partners and ourselves.
4. The first ten minutes of the animated film *Up* (directed by Pete Docter, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2009) tell a beautiful story about Carl and Ellie. It's a story that highlights the realities of life and the sacrifices we must make for one another. Just kids when they meet, they grow up, get married, and try to start a family. When they discover they can't have children, Carl comforts Ellie and helps her find something to hope for: a grand adventure. They put all their spare change and extra money into a bottle to save for a trip to Paradise Falls. However, they must break open bottle after bottle of their savings through the years to pay for car troubles, broken bones, and home repairs. Finally, in their golden years, Carl is ready to surprise Ellie with the trip they've put off, but Ellie gets sick and dies before they can go. She conveys to him that she doesn't want

him to stop adventuring, though, even in her absence. Love grows and strengthens when two people sacrifice for each other over a lifetime.

5. Can you sacrifice too much for your spouse? In theory, if both partners are submitted to the Lord, we wouldn't be able to out-sacrifice one another, because each would be walking in tandem with God's will. However, marriages can become toxic and abusive when the ideal of mutual sacrifice becomes a play for power over each other. Amie M. Gordon writes, "Sacrifice is a hallmark of a close relationship, but it should not lead to neglecting your own needs" (Amie M. Gordon, "When Are You Sacrificing Too Much in Your Relationship?," *Greater Good Magazine*, August 15, 2012, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/when_are_you_sacrificing_too_much_in_your_relationship). She provides several questions to determine how to navigate tricky decisions and consider your motivation for compromising or sacrificing for your spouse. Godly love is sacrificial, and when we are living that out by the power and direction of the Spirit, it doesn't lead to control, resentment, or abuse. We see none of those things in Jesus's example.
6. A. W. Tozer was known to be a dedicated man of God, yet a quote from his wife, Ada, who remarried following his death, implies that he struggled to balance his pursuits—even noble ones. Speaking about her marriage after Tozer, she says, "I have never been happier in my life. Aiden [Tozer] loved Jesus Christ, but Leonard Odam loves me" (Lyle Dorsett, *A Passion for God: The Spiritual Journey of A. W. Tozer* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008], 160). Sadly, many a minister's spouse and children have expressed this sentiment. When we consider how to love well, compromise, and balance modern life with all its demands, may Tozer's complicated legacy encourage us to live so that our partners know we love Jesus *and* them very much.

Week 2

Text: 1 Timothy 6:11–16

Topics: Gentleness, Love, Marriage

Big Idea of the Message: Gentleness is a characteristic of someone who loves God and their significant other.

Application Point: The believer loves well when they act with gentleness toward their spouse, even in times of struggle and conflict.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. This passage that Paul wrote to Timothy is an earnest encouragement for Timothy to live well. Timothy is unlike the folks mentioned in the previous verses (1 Timothy 6:3–10). He is a “man of God” (v. 11). As such, Paul gives him a list reminiscent of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Instead of acting like a fool, he should pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love (that same sacrificial *agapē* love), steadfastness (which we will talk about later), and gentleness (v. 11). While marriage requires a healthy dose of each of those virtues, our study this week will focus on gentleness. What sets this passage apart from other verses about this “fruit” is what comes next. On the heels of gentleness comes the fight. We fight for the faith. No, this doesn’t mean we gain eternal life by our own efforts of strength and will. We confess our need for Jesus, like Timothy did (vv. 12–13). We live a life that keeps “the commandment unstained and free from reproach” (v. 14). In this instance, “The ‘commandment’ is probably broader than any single law. It refers to the entire body of sound teaching Paul had been describing throughout the letter. Timothy, by his own godly life and by his faithful ministry, was to preserve this body of truth from stain or reproach” (A. Duane Liftin, *1 Timothy*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary [Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2018], 1 Timothy 6:15).
2. Gentleness doesn’t get much airtime today, especially in anything involving a “fight.” We fight politically by trying to be louder and more aggressive as we shout our opinions. If we want to reach unchurched people in America, we do it bigger, flashier, and with more marketing! We seem to be strangely combative in every difference of opinion or subject we want to win people over about. What issues do you hear about on Twitter, in the grocery store, or in the community chat? Are you a proponent of public school, private school, or homeschool? Is it “Nobody wants to work anymore” or “Pay a living wage”? What is a woman’s proper role in the workplace, home, and church? Are men not manly enough, or too manly? So many opinions fight for the masses’ approval, but that doesn’t seem very Christian. “Our spiritual enemy opposes the Christian’s pursuit of godly ideals. Paul, therefore, urged his younger friend to plunge into this conflict and to fight (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1–4:5). The goal is worth fighting for, and it requires fighting for (cf. Phil. 3:12)” (Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 Timothy*, 2022, 129, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/1timothy.pdf>). The fight is fought by living out the righteousness, godliness, love, steadfastness, and gentleness that

Timothy is called to, not waging a culture war or asserting power and dominance over those we disagree with.

3. What does this have to do with marriage? Our “good fight of the faith” happens all the time, including in our homes. Gentleness should be a default for dealing with our spouse because caring for our marriages is part of living our lives for the glory of God. And yet, we don’t often talk about gentleness. This is weird, since Jesus described himself as “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). We see his gentleness as he deals with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). Isaiah describes the Messiah like this: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). Jonathan Edwards wisely wrote of the believer’s gentle spirit: “All that are truly godly, and real disciples of Christ, have this spirit in them; and not only so, but they are of this spirit; it is the spirit by which they are so possessed and governed, that it is their true and proper character” (<https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/affections/affections.vi.vii.html?queryID=20767817&resultID=126532>). Gentleness—in this passage *praotēs*—is also translated as meekness or mildness, similar to humility. It evokes a sense of intentional self-control and kindness. God asks us to fight not by force but by restraint.
4. It takes more strength to be gentle. Consider a disagreement with your partner. It’s easy to let loose and allow your frustration, emotion, anger, or irritation to lead the way. In the movie *A Marriage Story* (directed by Noah Baumbach [Netflix, 2019]), which chronicles the disintegration of a marriage, one scene is tough to watch, as the main characters Charlie and Nicole have an explosive fight. When asked about the scene, director Noah Baumbach talks about how his interviews with people impacted the direction of the scene. Baumbach says people revealed their worst fights and “how quickly things could ignite. But I was also thinking about fights in general between loved ones and intimates. Obviously, we see it with couples even outside the context of divorce. When there is such love and intimacy involved, things can get very volatile, and people are very sensitive. If you have two people who are coming at each other, both feeling hurt and insecure, it’s very hard to find common ground because everything feels hurtful by nature. You’re almost like two open wounds, but not manifesting as open wounds. They’re both coming at it in a more formal, seemingly controlled way. But we know right beneath the surface is such sensitivity” (Max Cea, “*Marriage Story* Director Noah Baumbach Breaks Down That Explosive Fight,” *GQ*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/marriage-story-director-noah-baumbach-breaks-down-that-explosive-fight>) The emotionally brutal scene includes shouting, cussing, blaming, a hole punched in the wall, and a declaration that one person wishes the other were dead. It is the antithesis of gentleness and is sadly relatable for many marriages. Gentleness is not weakness but intentional care for the person you are interacting with. Marriages will have problems. How we address those problems is up to us.
5. Gentleness is a quality both husband and wife can embody and that both husband and wife need to receive from their spouse. There is no place for physical violence or abuse in any home. Being physically gentle with your spouse

in how you care for one another in everyday life and in the bedroom is essential. Being emotionally gentle with your spouse is also important. Marriage requires vulnerability. When we treat one another with contempt or bitterness, we dishonor the image of God in our spouse and break down the trust level in the relationship. Abuse is not only physical, and gentleness requires us to speak to our partners with kindness, compassion, respect, and humility. We all have tender wounds we carry that only take a flippant word to tear open. Being mindful and gentle with one another in how we speak allows for helpful communication. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” By choosing our words wisely, we can build up the trust, love, and grace that marriages rely on. Your spouse should feel physically and emotionally safe in your presence.

6. In the movie *Guardians of the Galaxy* (directed by James Gunn [Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2014]), Groot is a walking, talking tree. He is lovable and fierce, a gentle giant. As they fight against their foe, the crew of misfit superheroes is destined for destruction as the ship they are on plummets to the ground. Groot expands his limbs and encapsulates the team in a quiet, calm, peaceful, secure orb made of his wooden arms. It is a stark contrast to the explosive destruction that surrounds them. His gentle care for his friends costs him his life, but his example of how to be strong and gentle is inspiring (1:37:30–1:41:00). May you find that safe place in the arms of your spouse and provide the same for them.

Week 3

Text: Philippians 2:1–8

Topics: Humility, Love, Marriage

Big Idea of the Message: Christ is the example of loving humility and is willing to lay aside his power for others.

Application Point: Christian marriage is two people unified in a single pursuit: to love God and one another well. To do that, we must humbly accept our limitations and those of our spouse, and put aside our selfishness for the best of each other.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. This passage focuses on Christ’s embodiment of humility and the call to the singularity of mind in treating others with love and caring for them well. Thomas Constable writes, “Paul advocated humility, namely, concern for the needs of others, not just one’s own needs, as the basis for unity in the church (cf. 1:22–26; 2:21)” (Thomas Constable, *Notes on Philippians*, 2022, 45, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/philippians.pdf>). This same humility helps create healthy marriages.
2. This passage is not a call to never acknowledge your own needs but an encouragement not to become so inner-focused that you miss the opportunity to serve each other. Often this attitude of deference will help us find our way out of our own malaise by giving us a greater purpose, outside of ourselves, when

helping another. Jesus's example shows us that when we humbly set aside our power and pride, we glorify God. Since we have experienced the transformative life of Christ by the Spirit, we then ought to live in unity (v. 1). The key to unity is being like-minded in love and purpose (v. 2). To do that, we must be able to put ourselves in one another's shoes. We must put aside our self-focused ambitions that would come at the cost of another and humbly recognize that the world, our faith, and our marriages don't revolve around only our happiness. We are not better or more important than anyone else, especially not our spouse. This means we must validate, not minimize, the feelings and experiences of our partners. Their needs are just as important as our own. "Humility before God and man is a virtue every child of God needs to strive for. A spirit of pride in human relations indicates a lack of humility before God" (Robert P. Lightner, *Philippians*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary [Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2018], *Philippians* 2:3–4).

3. Jesus is the premier example of this (vv. 5–11). "Christ did not hesitate to set aside His self-willed use of deity when He became a man. As God He had all the rights of deity, and yet during His incarnate state He surrendered His right to manifest Himself visibly as the God of all splendor and glory. ... 'Emptied,' from the Greek *kenoō*, points to the divesting of His self-interests, but not of His deity" (Lightner, *Philippians*, *Philippians* 2:6–8). Choosing to live humbly toward another does not negate your self-worth or unique personhood. You do not become less of a person by living humbly with your spouse. The goal is to help one another grow into the most that you can be in the light of Jesus.
4. In the movie *Thor: Love and Thunder* (directed by Taika Waititi [Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2022], 1:11:20–1:13:16), Jane Foster, Thor's one true love, has returned as a Thor. She is strong and powerful. They are trying to play it cool, but it's obvious that they still love one another. As Thor Odinson confesses his love to Jane, she blurts out the truth. She has cancer when she is in her human state. She is dying. She puts aside her desires because the man she loves deserves to know what he would be stepping into. Even though it may come at a cost for her, honesty is worth it because love isn't selfish. It puts the needs of the person you love in the proper perspective and never puts one spouse's wants above the other's. Thor, in return, doesn't make it all about himself but meets her confession with compassion and commitment.
5. So what happens when you can't come to an agreement with your spouse about something? Someone must decide. There will be many times when you and your partner have a difference of opinion. Humility recognizes that no one is perfect and allows for grace, not heavy-handed decision-making, resentment, blaming, or bitterness. Proper communication—though often inconvenient and challenging—will help you navigate those situations with understanding, compromise, and acceptance. Striving for unity is not the same as striving for uniformity. Even in marriage, where commonalities and shared interests are great connection points, you are not precisely the same person. You each have different strengths, experiences, and gifts that benefit, not hinder. Even when disagreements occur, both parties still have a singular purpose: to glorify God

individually and in your marriage. What does it look like to continue to play on the same team, even if you disagreed about one play in the game?

6. Marriage is a good gift and one we receive with humility. Not everyone will get married. It isn't a guarantee or a reward for right living. It is a gift of grace, and we should recognize it as such. Like previously boastful Peter, who humbly kneels in [this painting](#), we too humble ourselves at the great privilege it is to serve God in whatever capacity he gives us—for we don't deserve any of it. If we try to serve our partners by lording over them rather than kneeling before God to guide us, then we've failed to think soberly or humbly about ourselves in light of Jesus.
7. Andrew Murray, a South African pastor during the 1800s, wrote, "It is easy to think we humble ourselves before God: humility towards men will be the only sufficient proof that our humility before God is real; that humility has taken up its abode in us; and become our very nature; that we actually, like Christ, have made ourselves of no reputation. When in the presence of God lowliness of heart has become, not a posture we pray to Him, but the very spirit of our life, it will manifest itself in all our bearing towards our brethren. The lesson is one of deep import: the only humility that is really ours is not that which we try to show before God in prayer, but that which we carry with us, and carry out, in our ordinary conduct; the insignificance of daily life are the importances and the tests of eternity, because they prove what really is the spirit that possesses us. It is in our most unguarded moments that we really show and see what we are. To know the humble man, to know how the humble man behaves, you must follow him in the common course of daily life" (Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* [London: James Nisbet & Co., 1896], 44–45). If someone watched how you treated your spouse, would they consider you humble?
8. Finally, humility means that your spouse doesn't owe you anything. The way you love your spouse, if you follow the example of Jesus, is not dependent on what they do for you. Pride will tell you that you have been doing so much for them, so they owe you. Wrong. Yes, your partner's response to you will often be influenced by how you treat them, but it isn't the determining factor in how often you *deserve* sex, support, gifts, or kindness. Marriage is a partnership that requires both partners to be invested in the relationship, but humble love never demands.

Week 4

Text: Colossians 1:3–14

Topics: Endurance, Love, Marriage

Big Idea of the Message: God enables the believer to live well in Christ and with endurance.

Application Point: Marriage will have many ups and downs, but the believer plays the long game, knowing that in Christ, they have the strength and grace to love their spouse well in all seasons, for better or worse, for a lifetime.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. This opening passage in the book of Colossians is Paul's response to the report from Epaphras about the Colossians. Paul is grateful for them, hoping they embrace the fullness of life in Christ (vv. 3–7). They are a loving group (v. 8), and he is praying for them to mature in Christ, to grow in the knowledge of God, his will, and wisdom, and to bear spiritual fruit (vv. 9–10). He is asking God to strengthen the Colossians so they may be patient and have endurance as they joyfully live for God all their lives. The redemption that they have experienced through Jesus is a beautiful inheritance. May they walk in that deliverance forever (vv. 11–13). We need God's supernatural strength for every endeavor—this passage clarifies. To live a life worthy of the Lord, we need his help. Our marriages are no different.
2. An old country song by Alan Jackson called "Livin' on Love" espouses the idea that "it doesn't take much when you get enough" to live on love. That may be true if love includes everything we've touched on in this series—love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13, love that exhibits those fruits of the Spirit, love that is sacrificial, humble, and gentle. That type of love, if we could live it perfectly, might be enough, but we know that we are not able to love perfectly. Troubles will arise. Our commitment to one another will be tested. Humans have a way of being annoying, testing our patience, and being sinners. So the only way we can spend a lifetime living on love is when it is rooted and strengthened to endure through Christ.
3. God's strength produces in us endurance and patience. The original Greek of these words is [*hypomonē*](#) and [*makrothymia*](#). They can almost be used interchangeably because they encapsulate a similar meaning. In other translations, you may have read them translated as "longsuffering" or "steadfast." When God strengthens our marriages, it results in a relationship that perseveres and withstands trials. Rather than a roller coaster of highs and lows, hot and cold, both partners rest in the long game of faithful, lasting love that isn't impulsive and reactive but enduring.
4. [Almost 20 percent of intimate relationships are physically abusive, and verbal/emotional abuse is even more common.](#) This week would be a good time to reiterate that enduring in your marriage does not mean accepting any type of abuse. Have local resources available for your congregants.

5. This feel-good article is about four couples and their advice on staying married for over fifty years: <https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/couples-married-longer-50-years-spill-secret-long/story?id=45222748>.
6. Older couples often chuckle at the expectations of young, newly married couples. They might say, “Just wait until the honeymoon is over!” Yes, the early days of marriage are passionate and exciting! You’re always learning something new about your partner. But those aren’t necessarily the best days. There is safety and comfort in sharing so many memories with another person. Those shared experiences, failures, victories, and everything in between forge a bond that is not quickly broken. Instead of becoming bored or tired of your spouse through the years, by the grace of God, you can become even more grateful for a partner to share your life with. Dustin Kensure sings [a tender song](#) that looks forward to seeing his lover wear “a crown of gray.”
7. The depiction of the relationship between Jim and Mae Braddock in the movie *Cinderella Man* (directed by Ron Howard, Universal Pictures, 2005) is an excellent example of a marriage characterized by endurance and patience. If you don’t know the story, you can read more about it here: <http://www.jamesjbraddock.com>. The movie does an excellent job of showing their struggles during the Great Depression, Mae’s unwavering support of her husband—even when she worried about his boxing—and Jim’s commitment to and love for Mae and their family. In the movie’s climactic scene, Jim faces a fierce opponent, one who had killed opponents in the ring before. He and Mae have argued about his participation in the fight, but when the big day arrives, Jim plans to go through with it. Mae visits him in this clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83Jr_6b9pHA&list=PLZbXA4lyCtqpndvSE-FjVrytE-z4ay5Y9&index=6. When you see your spouse without pretending they are perfect, but you are strengthened by the grace of God to endure, you too can help build a relationship in which your spouse is the champion of your heart.

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