“Clothe Yourselves with Love”

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Colossians 3:12-19
February 16, 2014
Our mission here at VPC is, “Becoming like Christ, together, for the world” and, during this month of February, we are focusing on the “together” part. Last week, Pastor Pete spoke of developing our friendships with one another. Today, we talk about marriage. Coming up, we will talk about family life and community life. Of course, talking about marriage is always a bit of a high-wire endeavor. Some of us have fine marriages. Some of us had our marriages end in very difficult ways and some of us are finding that the whole concept of “life is messy” is perfectly illustrated in our marriages. Many of us are single. Sometimes, I think that it’s our children who have the clearest views of love and marriage.

1. (Roger, 9) “Falling in love is like an avalanche where you have to run for your life.”
2. (Leo, 7) “If falling in love is anything like learning how to spell, I don’t want to do it. It takes too long.”
3. (Regina, 10) “I’m not rushing into being in love. I’m finding fourth grade hard enough.”
4. What's the proper age to get married? (Carolyn, 8) “Eighty-four, because at that age you don’t have to work anymore, and you can spend all your time loving each other.”
5. (Eric, age 6) “Marriage is when you get to keep your girl and don’t have to give her back to her parents.”

Two weeks ago, Pete preached on Colossians 3:12-17, where we find at least seven imperatives, seven commands to describe what it means to be God’s beloved people. At the moment Pete put the slide up listing the seven imperatives, I had been reflecting on marriage knowing I’d be talking about it today. When I saw his seven points I thought, “Wow! Although these points apply to relationships in general, every one of them applies perfectly to marriage! I will touch on just a few of them to show you what I mean.

Point number 1: Surrender to Christ. Whether you are married or single, the most significant thing you can do is to center your own life on Jesus. Jesus will give you his strength and grace daily. If you are married, Jesus

1 “Preaching” November/December 1998
will help you give the same strength and grace to your husband or wife. If your husband or wife does not share your trust in Jesus, then don’t talk your faith, become your faith. Model the faith. My friend Jim Walker became a Christian simply because he saw the grace of the reality of Jesus in the life of his wife, Charlotte.

Point number 2: Put up with EGR moments with grace. An EGR person is an “Extra Grace Required” person – someone whose behavior or personality quirks or annoying habits or approach to life you find difficult to put up with and it takes extra grace to bear with them. Like the moment Ann Marie had to contend with when I backed her minivan though the closed garage door tearing up both the minivan and the door. In marriage, it doesn’t take long to find every one of us is an EGR person or is married to an EGR person at some moments in our lives. In the EGR moment, it is up to us to show extra grace.

Jim Tozer was my mentor, friend, pastor and boss for many years. I remember asking him, “How do you know if you have found a person with whom you could share a good married life together?” He replied immediately, “The Sail Boat Principle.” I asked, “The Sail Boat Principle?” He explained that on the bottom of a sailboat is a large slab of steel called the keel. The heavy keel keeps the bottom of the boat "down" and provides a counter weight to the sail. When a sailboat blows over in the wind, there is nothing you can do straighten it up—the weight in the keel has to counter-balance the sail and set the ship upright.

“In a similar way,” said Jim, “mature people have weighty inner keels. When life knocks them over and something happens that is deeply upsetting and they are having an EGR moment, their inner keel gives them the capacity within themselves to get back on their feet. You don’t straighten them up. You can’t straighten them up. They have to have it within themselves.” If something rough happens to them and they flip out, freak out or hold a grudge, if they have an inner keel, a centeredness in personal maturity and faith in Jesus, then by God’s grace they will stand upright again and carry on. Jim Tozer was actually telling me to look beyond for the inner keel of a potential spouse’s life and to also look to the inner keel of my own life. Be centered. Be mature. Be surrendered to Jesus Christ—and put up with the EGR moments in your life or your spouse’s life with grace—and be the kind of person who brings the centeredness of maturity and faith to your husband or wife.
Of the seven imperatives, Colossians, Chapter 3 points out that numbers 4 and 5, “I am third” and “relax control,” actually go together. Both depend on the first point, “surrender to Christ!” Last fall, I shared with you that a man by the name of Bernard Harnik taught me the finest expression of Christian love I had ever heard: “Love is a willingness to be frustrated.” You want one thing and your husband or wife wants something else. You, out of love, give up your preference, even though that is frustrating to you. That is love. You want a red car, he wants a blue one. You want to watch the Olympics, she wants to watch Downton Abbey. Your graciously-accepted frustration is a loving giving up, with no muttering, no pouting and no passive-aggressive behavior, and you preserve and sustain your marriage.

Bernard Harnick offered his understanding of love as a willingness to be frustrated as a part of a broader understanding of how married couples make decisions. Bernard’s view was that the key to your marriage is how you make decisions together and handle the moments of conflict that are a part of our daily messy lives. In recent research, Howard Markman and his team looked into four behavior patterns that lead marriages to succeed or to end in divorce. It led them to the point that Markman and his colleagues could watch a couple interact for just 15 minutes and predict, with 90 percent accuracy, who will and who won’t be together and happy five years later—simply by watching how the couple behaves during one crucial moment: The moment of disagreement. They found staying happily married, “primarily comes down to how people behave during the few minutes a day or week when they disagree. If a couple’s disagreements include significant amounts of four behaviors (blaming, escalation, invalidation, or withdrawal), then their future is bleak. If, on the other hand, they learn to take time out and communicate respectfully during these few minutes, then their entire future will be far brighter.”

So Bernard Harnik drew five pictures that illustrate five patterns of decision-making, what you might call the choreography of decision-making, because each pattern clearly is a dance between a husband and a wife—and if you know the dance you know how it will end from the very first step. If the dances in your marriage don’t end well, don’t change your

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partner, change your choreography! It’s all about being third—God first, spouse second, you third. It’s about relaxing control.

Bernard’s first picture is of an H over a W, an H (the husband) with a line under it and the W (wife) underneath that. In this picture, the husband dominates the wife and whatever decisions are made, they always go his way. Whether he is a “nice” person or operates in a loud overbearing or quiet passive-aggressive style, he always get his way, she never gets her way. Bernard said after twenty years she will become so frustrated she will likely do one of three things: become extremely angry and touchy, which Bernard portrayed with an arrow pointing up; or she may withdraw into depression, an arrow pointing down, “I am a nothing. I am of no value in this relationship.”; or she may escape the marriage in her children or her work or an affair or a divorce, the arrow pointing out.

The second pattern is like unto the first, with the W over the H. In this case, the wife dominates. After all is said and done in the resolution of a conflict or a disagreement, she always gets her way. And, if that continues for twenty years, the husband will react in the same three ways, anger, withdrawal or escape. The third pattern is the H and W side by side with a dark line between them, an impenetrable wall. In the first pattern, a conflict is always resolved in his favor, in the second pattern it goes in her favor, but in this pattern they simply refuse to deal with it. They ignore it until the small conflicts become huge ones that engulf them.

The fourth pattern is fun to draw and very un-fun to live. The H and W are side by side with a lightning bolt between them representing 10 billion volts of electricity. In the first pattern, H/W, he decides, he dominates her. In the second pattern, W/H, she dominates him and in the third pattern, a wall between H and W, neither is willing to dominate the other. In this fourth pattern, neither is able to dominate the other. It’s the Hatfield and the McCoys or the comic strip, “The Lockhorns,” comes to mind. A couple drove several miles down a country road not saying a word. An earlier discussion had led to an argument, and neither wanted to concede their position. The lightening bolt was between them. As they passed a barnyard of mules and pigs, the husband sarcastically asked, "Relatives of yours?" "Yep," the wife replied, "My in-laws."
It is not unusual for any given married couple to experience all four of these patterns over a period of many years; however, obviously none of these four decision-making patterns are healthy. Their choreography always leads to messier lives and to pain.

It is Bernard Harnik’s fifth pattern that is wonderful and life-giving. First, the H and the W are side by side with an equal sign between them and the cross that represents Jesus is above them. The equal sign means they are of equal value before Jesus, both utterly significant, both of infinite worth. When the husband and wife disagree, they have the opportunity to practice Ephesians 5:21: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. The husband, out of reverence for Jesus and out of love for his wife, submits, yields to what she prefers, is willing to be frustrated for her. The wife, out of reverence for Jesus and out of love for her husband, submits, yields to what he prefers, is willing to be frustrated for him.

It’s worth noting that if either the husband or the wife is the one who always yields, who always experiences frustration, even though out of reverence for Jesus and out of love, then practically speaking the choreography is no longer H equals W under Jesus but feels like H over W or W over H. Joy is about both parties showing humility and grace to each other. It’s about a graceful parity.

One of the best ways to establish and sustain such a mutual relationship is something I learned from Charlie Shedd, a wonderful Presbyterian pastor who was 80 when he spoke to me and Ann Marie in our thirties. He said, “Martha and I have gone out for a meal alone—no kids or friends—every week for forty years and you should too.” We have and it’s made all the difference. Charlie also said, “Take each at-home child (or in the same metro) out to lunch once a month. Again we found that incredibly valuable counsel.

Now, our Colossians text includes these lines, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly” (Colossians 3:18-19). Sometimes people take these verses out of context and come up with all sorts of misunderstandings about marriage. However, if you bear in mind the context of Paul’s counsel for husbands and wives are these seven grace-filled imperatives, then you realize that all that the apostle Paul is saying is to show a keen
deference to one another; practice a radical humility toward one another. Out of reverence and respect for Jesus Christ and for one another, serve one another. And that’s choreography for life! As the apostle Paul summed it up, “Clothe yourselves in love!”

Dale Moody tells the story of the death of his mother, “The day my mother died, she and my father were having breakfast, when suddenly she slumped in her chair and fell to the floor. My father, her husband of fifty-four years, ran around to the other side of the table, swept up his bride, and went running from the house….Sadly my elderly mother was dead on arrival at the hospital. “After the funeral, my brother, my father and I retreated to the old homestead, sat on the back porch on rocking chairs, and reminisced. After an hour or so, Dad asked me and my brother, ‘What do you suppose Mama is doing right now? What do you think she is doing this very moment?’ It was my brother who came up with the best answer, ‘Mom closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the first thing she saw was the face of Jesus. I think at this very moment she is still reveling in that experience.’

“My old Dad smiled blissfully, then began to recite the words of an old gospel song: ‘When by His grace, I shall look on His face, that will be glory—be glory for me!’ Then he said, ‘Take me back to the cemetery.’ I protested, ‘Dad! It’s 10:30 at night!’ ‘Don’t argue with somebody who has just buried his wife of fifty-four years!’ responded the old man. ‘Now take me back to the cemetery!’

“When Dale’s family arrived at the gravesite, the old man checked things out to make sure that everything was just as it should be. He tidied up some of the flower arrangements, rubbed some dirt off of some stones, then stood back and stared at the grave for a long, long time.

“He then reached out and put an arm around each of his son’s shoulders. Squeezing his two sons against his body, he said, ‘Boys, it was a good fifty-four years and it ended just the way I wanted it to end—your mother went first! You see, when two people care about each other as much as your mother and I cared about each other, each wants the other to go first. I didn’t want her to go through the pain of having to put me in the grave. If anybody was going to suffer, I wanted it to be me.’ After a poignant silence, the old man said, ‘We can go home now. It was a good fifty-four
years! And come to think of it boys, it’s been a good day! I hope you understand that. It’s been a very good day.”

May the Lord who loves you inspire in you a keen deference to one another, and a radical humility toward one another, especially toward the one to whom you may be married. Out of reverence and respect for Jesus Christ and for one another, serve one another. That’s a choreography for life! “Clothe yourselves in love!”

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