



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 26, 2015

"Creating Healthy Relationships" (Worthy Series) - Eph. 5:21-33

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Now as you heard from the scripture reading, today's sermon is about marriage. Getting it right in marriage has been a struggle since the Garden of Eden. But if you've found that right spouse—life can be awesome!

Listen to one guy who found the right one for him: "I married Miss Right. I just didn't know her first name was Always."

When I do premarital counseling I often tell the couple: Dating is putting your best foot forward. Marriage is dealing with the other foot.

These slightly cynical sayings reflect the more humorous side of what is sometimes a deep struggle for two people becoming one.

Today we are going to continue in our study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and what it means to live a life worthy of our calling. That is, how should we live in a manner that increasingly reflect God's intended purposes for our lives both individually and communally?

And today we will be specifically focusing on how our marriages (or dating relationships or other kinds of relationships) can increasingly reflect God's intended purpose for our lives.

Now I'm sure some of us cringed a little as we hear words like: "*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord*" (verse 22) or "*The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...*" (verse 25). But before we tune Paul out, let us keep in mind some important cultural issues surrounding this passage.

First of all, what you see being expressed here is an ancient practice of establishing "Household Codes." In the ancient world philosophers and teachers (starting with Aristotle), would write out "Household Codes" directing a man on how to Rule, Relate to, and Deal with members of his household. This Code was usually broken down into discussions of husband/wife, parent/child and master/slave relationships.

If you read the end of chapter 5 and the beginning of

chapter 6 in Ephesians, these are exactly the relationships Paul addresses. So Paul was indeed a man of his time.

Furthermore, it is very important to know that Paul wrote in a day where Christians were often treated with suspicion. In Paul's day many Romans were troubled by the spread of "religions from the East," which would have included Judaism and Christianity. They thought these religions undermined traditional Roman family values, so they were suspected of being socially subversive.

Thus Paul, not wanting Christians to be perceived as threats to the order and health of society, would use the cultural language and expressions of the day to communicate God's truth. This would help Christians to be a good witness to the surrounding culture and keep the persecution off.

But here is a key thing to keep in mind as we read this. Even as Paul relates Christianity to the standards of his culture, he also subverts his culture's values by going far beyond them.

Let me explain further. In Paul's day women were viewed as inferior to men in most ways. So the Household Codes reflected that assumed inferiority. Such codes told husbands to make their wives submit in marriage. They never encouraged, as Paul does, mutual submission.

In addition, they rarely, if ever, exhorted the husband to love his wife in the way Paul teaches (although they might mention to respect her).

In fact, check out how women are characterized and valued in the ancient world. According to the writings of their day, men said women were: "Weaker emotionally, unfit for battle, unfit for the courts, a curse on men (said by a few), less valuable than male warriors, morally weak, less virtuous than men, produced only base passions and folly, less rational than men, and could not be trusted to make responsible choices.

In Palestine, the Jewish sect of the Essenes, held this belief: "Women are selfish and devote all their energy leading their husbands to error." (Philo)

So by framing the Household Codes within a statement of mutual submission (verse 21), and by declaring that a husband should love his wife just as Christ loves the church (verse 25), Paul is introducing concepts that would have been deemed

extremely progressive for the time (or just plain crazy!!).

Now what does it look like to "Submit one to another"? It sounds great but what can it look like?

Let me compare it to a musical jam session. How many of you folks play a musical instrument? Ever have a jam session with others? Here is a clip of two men having a mini-jam session with two different guitars.

Notice how each person supports the other as the other takes a turn to lead. And notice the one in the supporting role does not become less than what they were when they were leading. The joy and smile on their faces remain as they shift back and forth in leading and supporting roles.

The objective of such a jam session is not who must maintain leadership at all times, but how can they together create beauty? How can they together allow the best in each other to come alive?

Could you do that in your marriages? Could you relate in a way where each person is seeking to enable the other to arise in such joy and beauty?

Now let's look a little deeper at another subversion of Roman Codes. Look at Verses 25-27: "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and*

gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

Note again how Paul subversively frames a husband's leadership in terms of sacrificial love. And what is particularly important to notice here are the outcomes of such love. A Christ-like leadership creates a greater radiance, holiness, and Christ-likeness in those being led.

My point is, wherever you want to stand on the whole Authority-Submission issue, the goal and outcome of that relationship needs to be one where the one leading seeks to make the spouse more radiant and godly.

Can you imagine what a first century woman felt, who has heard all her life all those sexist things I mentioned before (less virtuous; a curse on men, etc.), when she now hears Paul direct men to lead out of sacrificial love; to lead in a way where she ends up more radiant, more holy, etc.?

Is she thinking, "Well, that's oppressive!" Or is she thinking, "I don't believe what I am hearing! This is awesome. This is a dream come true!"

Grabbing her husband she says, "Did you hear that?! That's how you are to treat me!"

My point is, even though Paul has emphasized the notion of submission of the wife, he emphasizes to the husband not authority, but love; not ruling, but sacrificing. He emphasizes care rather than control.

In other words, authority here has to do with the power to nurture, not crush; the power to serve, not to dominate. In Paul's mind authority is used to help a woman display her true glory.

As two Christian writers put it: "We are to shape the still unformed beauty of each other's soul to reveal God's character more fully." (Dan Allender and Tremper Longman).

And that my friends is what spiritual leadership is all about. It is to this kind of husband and headship a wife was to submit.

Some of you might be thinking, "Steve, are you saying a man should never lead his spouse?" Absolutely not. But if you would indulge me one more time with another metaphor for leadership, other than the Roman Household Code, it might help us here.

Sometimes I like to use the metaphor of a dance, because in a dance you have a leader and one being led.

However, when a man leads in a dance he leads in an entirely different way than a Roman Household would dictate and for entirely different goals.

You see, when a man leads a dance the woman chooses to accept, not his demand to take over, but his invitation to give guidance and care in the dance.

In a dance the man uses his strength and skills not to dominate his partner, but to take her on a journey—to bring out her beauty, her grace, her radiance.

To illustrate this let me show a brief clip of a style of dance called the Tango. For me, the Tango is a way of dancing that brings out so much of our masculinity and our femininity, and how couples can work together.

In the Tango scene what do you see? You see harmony, not competition—even though there is leading and being led. You see beauty, you see passion, you see joy, you see artistry, and you feel awe.

Notice how when this couple danced they seemed so fully integrated. And even though there was leading going on, no one was trying to dominate; and even though someone is being led, no one was being a doormat.

In fact, both of them together are bringing out the best in each other. You see, dancing is not simply about who gets to lead or follow, but about creating greater beauty as two people become more than what they would be on their own. That's what we are

trying to do in the dance of marriage.

So men let me encourage you to live in such a way as a man whereby your treatment and attitude toward a woman, you lovingly, and respectfully and honorably draw out of her all her greatness, all her strength, all her beauty—no longer leaving such things suppressed, ignored, diminished, or under appreciated.

Okay, so before we leave these verses, let's look one more time at Paul's summary statement about this whole section on marriage.

In verse 33 he says, *"However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."*

Ladies, what does respect from your end look like today? Are you aware of or do you know when you are moving toward disrespect? Over the years I have seen some of the biggest ways couples show disrespect toward each other is through harsh, demeaning, contemptuous language and actions.

Psychologists and researchers, John and Julie Gottman, did some longitudinal studies on couples and what they found again and again was this: Contempt is the number one factor that tears couples apart.

What do I mean by contempt? It would include, for example: Asking your spouse to do a task and then criticizing how it was done; Discussing his/her shortcomings, especially in front of others; Pointing out physical flaws (e.g. weight gain); Belittling what he/she does for a living or when they do something, you belittle it (e.g. "My gosh, that is so lame. Why can't you get it right!?"); Giving the cold shoulder or shutting yourself off from your spouse; and especially using any derogatory or demeaning language (e.g. stupid, idiot, jerk, or other words that personally demean another.) You get the idea.

It's really easy, isn't it, when your spouse does something wrong to almost impulsively respond with, "I can't believe how stupid you are." "You are such an idiot." "You are being a real jerk right now."

Here's some biblical wisdom that underscores the importance of these scientific findings. Proverbs 12:18 says, *"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."*

Notice how "reckless words" are not compared to a mere "pin prick", but a "piercing sword", an instrument that does severe damage. And cuts from swords take a longer time to heal and lose their pain.

The power of "reckless words" is once again verified by science. Here's some more research the Gottmans found: Couples who thrive have a 5 to 1 ratio of positive remarks verses negative remarks. When couples fall below this ratio they tend to have increasing problems.

But why is the ratio so lopsided? Scientists believe that our brains are hardwired to more readily pick out and latch onto negative things in the world. They believe it's a protective mechanism to insure survival and long life. For thousands of years when one walked from here to there, they didn't simply walk casually and look at all the nice flowers along the way. Their brains honed in on that which could eat them for lunch!

So it has long been to our advantage to have a brain hardwired to notice and to latch on to the negative things we see, hear, and feel—because it tended to give us a longer life span! But even though we may have a better chance at a longer life, latching on to negative things can really bring death to a relationship.

In case you still may not believe the power of a negative comment let me give you this example. If you and I were talking and I said, "Tom, you're really a smart guy, hard worker, great Bible teacher, a bit of a jerk to your wife, a super servant at church, a good provider for your

family and are really great at sports."

When you go home what's the thing you remember about what I said about you? You remember, "Steve called me a jerk!" Now one of the big deals about this is that the negative memory and experience of what I said begins to color and shape our relationship. So now, the next time you see me your guard is up, your trust toward me is down, and now in your heart I'm a little unsafe.

And it becomes difficult to have any close relationship when one feels a lack of trust and safety. This is why with our spouses or kids or friends, we must be very intentional about curbing our harsh talk. Our harshness, our disrespectful language will block out a lot of good things that we may actually be doing.

This is one of the reasons why when I counsel couples and one spouse says to the other, "You always hurt me.'

And then the other spouse responds with, "What do you mean I always hurt you? I do all kinds of nice things for you."

The truth is you may have done nice things, but the brain will not necessarily remember it that way—because the "nice things" sit in a pile of so many other negative things.

And here is another thing about being a critical spouse: People who are focused on criticizing their partners miss a whopping 50 percent of positive things their partners are doing. The negativity almost creates a type of “tunnel vision” that only sees the bad. And what is really crazy is that they see negativity even when it’s not there!

Let me be honest, before we got married my wife knew the kind of person I was before I became a Christian, and she knew the kind of family I grew up in: the type of family that cussed a lot at each other. She would tell me that even though I no longer have a foul mouth, I come really close to cussing in the way I talk. She also let me know that I could sound a bit harsh when I expressed my frustration or anger.

So she set the bar from the beginning of our marriage to never use derogatory language toward each other—not stupid, idiot, dipstick, jerk, dork or whatever. And for over 26 years we have never gone there.

I don’t say that to pat ourselves on the back, but I just want to point out that you can really live this way—even if you come out of a real foul background. And I also bring this up to point out how much hurt and conflict we avoided as a couple simply by that one discipline. And imagine how much anxiety our kids were spared because they did not

hear mom and dad demean each other even as we argued with each other.

Let me be honest, sometimes as a small child I would sit in my room and tear up as I heard my parents argue, because I could not believe two people who could say those things to each other would stay married. So I often had this anxiety about them getting a divorce (which they never did). But my point is this, our contempt does not just express anger, it creates insecurity and anxiety in family systems.

Now here’s another challenge. Speaking positive things will be hard work because research also shows most of what comes out of our mouths in a day is negative—about 75% (e.g. “Look at this lousy traffic!” “I can’t believe the price of milk!” “This is taking so long!” etc.). So most of us have a real habit of negative-speak that will be difficult to break. And it will take a lot of spiritual discipline and the work of the Holy Spirit within us to overcome this habit.

So before I close let me give just two pointers to create greater love and happiness in a relationship—and this will go for all kinds of relationships.

When the Gottmans looked at healthy and happy couples and couples that were unhealthy, they noticed something interesting: Unhealthy couples would scan their social environment for their

partner’s mistakes. The healthy couples had what they called “a habit of mind.” That is, the healthy couples would scan their social environment for things they could appreciate and say thank you for.

And on top of that, and this is key: they built a culture of respect and appreciation very purposefully. Don’t miss that. One has to be very intentional about creating such a culture. Healthy marriages are not automatic or inevitable, they’re intentional.

My wife has created a culture of appreciation in our family. From the time we were first married and started to have kids, every time there was a birthday we would all go around the table stating what we appreciated about the birthday person. Our kids used to roll their eyes at this when they were small, but now as adults they make sure we do it.

I really want to encourage you couples to try that on a regular basis. Each day, before you go to sleep, express to each other one thing—even one small thing—you appreciate about what your spouse did that day. For example, you could say, “I really appreciate you cleaning up the table after dinner.”

Now what is also important for this is expressing why you appreciated that act such as, “I really appreciated you cleaning up the table after dinner, because I felt really supported.”

Expressing appreciation says, “I scanned and saw the good thing you did today.” And the “why” part expresses how I felt or was impacted by that action. In other words, it gets us to express our hearts.

This culture of appreciation has germinated other areas of our family life. When I do something with my son or buy something for him, he will automatically express his appreciation, even if it was just a small bag of french fries. It’s now a part of who he is as a person. And this culture of appreciation adds to the warmth, trust, and intimacy of our family relationships.

Brothers and sisters, in all honesty, how goes your “scanning”? How’s your habit of mind toward your spouse? Are you being purposeful about creating a culture, an ethos, an enduring attitude of respect and appreciation in your relationships?

Ladies, let me be honest with you, although most guys won’t say this, receiving appreciation and reassurance from you goes a long way in building him up.

This is why for example when you say simple things like, “I really appreciate you fixing the pipe in the bathroom, or cutting the lawn, or painting the door, or working so hard for the family, or telling him what a great lover he is, sends him to the moon with

positive feelings. This positive reinforcement of his worth on a regular basis is huge.

And men the same holds true for your wives. In Proverbs 31 it speaks of a “woman of noble character.” And part of what it says is this: (verse 28) *“Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.”*

Guys how long has it been since you praised your spouse?

Let me say one last thing. Guys we are always trying to figure out what makes a woman happy. It’s always a big mystery, isn’t it? Let me share some research to help you out.

According to a University of Virginia study, the biggest predictor of women's happiness is their husband's emotional engagement. I know what you’re thinking, “What in the world does that mean?” Well, for starters it means that if your wife is sharing her concerns about something, or telling you a story about work, or trying to get your input about the color of the curtains for the bathroom, and you look like this guy (photo of the face of a man extremely bored)...that’s not emotional engagement!

They define emotional engagement as any effort to: Express positive emotion to their wives; (think: kindness, affection, encouragement, empathy, etc.). It also means to be attentive to and tuned in on the dynamics of

their relationship and the needs of their wives. In other words, you’re tuned into what is going on in her life, how she is feeling; you’re inquisitive about her needs, etc.

And one more feature of emotional engagement is that you set aside time for activities focused specifically on your relationship. Think: date nights. Or even better, think: taking the initiative to plan the date nights.

Remember men, at the heart of Paul’s charge to us is to love our wives. And as I quoted to you the other week: The first duty of love is to listen (Paul Tillich). Start there and do that to the best of your ability.

Former Pope John Paul II is quoted as saying, “The future of humanity passes through the family.” When Christ and His standards for marriage, His purposes, goals, and values permeate our relationships, not only do our marriages change, but the world changes also. When Christ is at the center of how we treat each other, things like business and economies and poverty changes—because women are empowered and treated and rewarded equally in the workplace. Think of how if we lived into Paul’s directives, it would change the face of divorce, abuse, and domestic violence.

Live with Christ at the center of your marriage and it changes everything.