

“MAKING LOVE LAST A LIFETIME (#5):  
LOVE THAT LASTS A LIFETIME”

(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

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**[PROP NEEDED: (1) Video interview(s) with member(s) married 50+ years;  
and (2) PPT triangle graphic]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-11-07]

--I--

1. Read Text: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Pray.
2. Since the middle of January, we've been sharing in a series called Making Love Last A Lifetime in which we've been exploring biblical perspectives about love, marriage, and sexuality to learn how they can help us improve our relationships, whether we're married or single.

A--As most of us know, though, this is not an easy task. <sup>1</sup> So what makes the difference between those who succeed and those who fail in their relationships?

B--Well, last week we talked about four habits that enable us to have effective marriages and other relationships.

C--And I mentioned at the end that there is one final “habit” which I believe the Bible teaches that no successful relationship can do without (marriage or otherwise).

3. We find it in Verse 12 of today's scripture from Ecclesiastes 4: *“Though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not easily broken.”* <sup>2</sup>

A--Think about a braid in someone's hair:

1--On the surface it *appears* to contain just *two* strands of hair woven together.

2--But if you've ever tried to create a braid with just 2 strands, they come right apart!

3--No. The secret to a successful braid is a **THIRD** strand which, though not outwardly apparent, holds the other two together.

B--So in this scripture, we can probably understand the “two” that it refers to (i.e., a husband & wife, parent & child, friend & friend). But what is the “three-fold cord”? What's this mysterious third strand of which the author speaks?

-II-

4. As Christians, it's our belief that the invisible “third strand” of any successful relationship (marriage or otherwise) is the presence of GOD through Jesus **Christ** in His **Church**.<sup>3</sup>

A--As we did last week, once again I want to invite you to listen to Luther and Carolyn Rabun (who've been married 60 years) as they talk about the role that Christian faith and the church has played in the success of their marriage.

B--[**SHOW VIDEO** with responses to Question#4: *“What role has the church and your faith played in the success of your marriage?”*]...

C–You know, even secular marriage counselors today affirm the importance of healthy relationships having a “*sense of shared purpose or meaning*,”<sup>4</sup> and for the Rabuns, at least, their faith in Christ and the Church give them this very thing.

5. Of course, many couples today try to create this “*third strand*” or “*shared sense of purpose*” out of things that simply don’t last: “success,” wealth, community service, vacations, having a nice home or a stable family, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

A–But for Christians, “shared purpose” and meaning comes not only from the fact that we have God IN our lives, but that we’ve learned to serve God THROUGH our lives.<sup>6</sup>

B–So for example, this means that marriage is NOT just about falling head over heels with *feelings* of love for another person, but that instead it’s *a calling, a mission*, in which a man and a woman enter into a covenant *with God* to minister not only to *each other*, but also to the *world around them*.<sup>7</sup>

1–You know, when Trish and I got married back in 1989, I already had a very strong sense of wanting to serve God through life, even though it was before I made the decision to enter full-time ordained ministry. Trish had a similar sense, as well.

2--And in our years together, we’ve found that (preacher or not) the most meaningful and rewarding experiences we’ve had have NOT been our trips to DisneyWorld or the Grand Canyon (through those were fun), but the times when we together helped or served others through some ministry or service of our church.<sup>8</sup>

6. And you know, the amazing thing about having a common mission and vision as a Christian couple is that the more we serve others and draw closer to Christ as *individuals*, the closer we find ourselves drawing to *one another*, as well.<sup>9</sup>

A–On the media screen you’ll see a graphic that illustrates this... **[SHOW PPT GRAPHIC ON MEDIA-SCREEN...]**

B–...And it’s THIS truth that makes a *Christian* marriage such a beautiful thing: the more deeply committed we are to *Christ*, the closer we grow to *each other*.<sup>10</sup>

C–Now, let me add that when I refer to a “*Christian marriage*,” I’m NOT just talking about two individuals who both have happened to give their hearts to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

1–That’s good, but just because Jesus is Lord of your *heart* DOESN’T necessary mean you’ve asked him be Lord of your *marriage*!<sup>11</sup>

2–No, if truly you want to have a “*Christian Marriage*,” then you have to intentionally *invite* Christ to be at the center and then *practice* that commitment through your *shared* actions and behaviors.

7. That's why I'm convinced that active participation in a local church is essential to the ultimate success of any marriage.

A–The Rabuns affirmed this in their testimony when they talked about how, with God's help through the support of their church, they were “*able to overcome the stumbling blocks*” of their married lives, including something as tragic as the death of their grandson.

B–Now, can we have a “Christian marriage” *without* being active in a church (at least in some general sense)? Perhaps so.

C–But I believe the scriptures are clear (and my years of pastoral experience bear this out) that you and I will never reach the heights of faith either in our individual or married lives *without* our regular, active participation in a local community of believers.

D–Warts and all friends, you and I *need* the institutional church in order to have an effective marriage or other close relationship, so I want to encourage you to make church attendance / participation a *priority* for your relationships.<sup>12</sup>

–III–

8. Now all of this begs the question, though: what happens **when we marry a person who ISN'T a Christian**, or who WON'T come to church with us, or who otherwise doesn't want to have ANY PART of our faith. **What do we do?**

A–First of all, let me encourage you to remember that the person you're married to is a person that Christ loves very much – Jesus spent most of his time here on earth with non-religious and nominally religious people just like your spouse.

B–You may not be able to share in the same mission that a Christian *couple* has, but you as a Christian *individual* have *another* very important mission: you live 24/7 with someone who Jesus came to seek and to save.

C–So, your role is NOT to nag them all the time about coming to church with you, or constantly harp on how bad they are for their unbelief, because these tactics will usually only drive a wedge between you, and push them *away from* Christ.

1–Instead, ask God to help you practice *His* grace and patience by allowing you to see your mate through the eyes of Christ.

2–*Pray* for them, that the “salt” of *your* faith will make them spiritually thirsty.

3–*Demonstrate* the love of Christ to them in concrete, tangible ways that they can understand.<sup>13</sup>

4–Then at the right time, ask God to help you to *gently* bear witness about your faith to them *without* casting judgment.

C--If we do these, it may just be that some of *our* faith begins to “rub off” on *them*, and that over time God will use US (and others) to bring them to HIM. <sup>14</sup>

--V--

9. The writer of Ecclesiastes says “A *threefold cord is not easily broken.*”

A--Friends, I’ll be honest: this 3<sup>rd</sup> strand is my primary reason for offering this sermon series.

1--It’s true that, if you’re single, I hope this series has offered you things to think about and consider as you date, or as you contemplate marriage, or just for your relationships with family and friends.

2--And if you’re married, I hope over these weeks we’ve offered you some things that can help to grow and deepen your relationship with your spouse, and maybe even take it to heights you never thought possible.

B--But more than all of this, my deepest desire for this series has been to help ALL of us to experience this “third strand” of the presence of God through Jesus in ALL of our relationships – ...

1--...To learn that when we when we invite Jesus to be the Lord of both our *individual lives* AND our *marriages* and *other relationships*,...

2--...And that when we *get involved in a Church* where we can grow our faith by serving others,...

3--...Then we’ll find our not only our *LIVES* changed, but also our *RELATIONSHIPS* transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

C--And its THEN, my friends, that I believe we’ll truly find “*Love That Lasts A Lifetime.*”

10. [PRAY: *Please bow your heads and close your eyes:*... Some of you here today (both married people and singles) heard what I said about it being extremely difficult to have truly successful relationships with others without a close, personal walk with Jesus Christ – you heard me say it, but you know that you don’t have it. Maybe you’ve had it in the past, or have been thinking about it for the future, but you’re not walking closely with Jesus right now. Well, today is a perfect day for you do that. So if that’s you, let me invite you first to offer a simple prayer like this one (say it with me under your breath, if you will): ‘**Lord Jesus, I give you my life. Forgive my sins and help me to follow you.**’ If you said that prayer, then you’ve begun the most important relationship you can ever have, and started on a journey that will last the rest of your life.

But as we continue with our heads bowed and eyes closed, I want to do something else here today, too: If you’re single, I want you to picture in your mind a relationship in your life that you’d like to improve (i.e., a parent, your child, a close friend, etc.) – hold onto that image just a minute. If you’re married, I want to ask you to reach over and take your mate’s hand and hold it (and if they’re not here picture yourself doing that in your mind).

Now for *everyone*, let me invite you to pray in your own way for just a minute or so, asking God to make you a blessing either to your mate or to the person you're thinking about, asking Him to help you forgive all of the hurts and grievances you have against one another, and to use you to minister to and encourage them in concrete, tangible ways. Take just a moment to quietly pray this for each other.... **(Brief silence for people to pray...)**

**'Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise for the gift of relationships that you've given to each one of us, and for the promise of hope that comes from you. Forgive us for the times when we've fallen short of your plan, and help us, O God, to surrender ourselves daily to you so that we can pursue your will and serve each other and minister with each other to the world around us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.'**

11. During that prayer time, some (perhaps many) of you made significant faith commitments to Jesus and to each other. To help you solidify those commitments, during our closing song I want to invite you to come forward together as a couple, or as a spouse whose mate is not here today, or also as a single person... Come forward and commit either your marriage or your singleness to God.
12. [HYMN: #399, "Take My Life and Let It Be"]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Life gets in the way. Human nature causes miscommunication. Misuse of finances and sexuality can cause misunderstanding. We get so busy that we fail to take time for each other. And so after many years, couples and friendships often grow apart. Some separate. Some get divorced. And yet, there are still some couples who make it work, and for whom marriage has not become a burden, but has actually grown and blossomed over the years.
2. Remember that Verses 9-11 talk about the importance of "*two [being] better than one*" because each has another to help them through life's difficulties. Well, let's first acknowledge that this passage is not talking *exclusively* about a marriage relationship. Its original context refers to the value of *friendship* and *community* – of not thinking that we can make it through life on our own! But as I've mentioned in previous weeks, if we ARE married, then how much MORE so should these verses apply to our marriage relationship (hence these verses are often read at weddings).
3. This is why I believe it's so important that the most important trait for Singles to look for in a dating relationship is NOT "hot" looks, or "niceness," or how much money they have, but rather... *Christian faith*. So let me encourage and challenge those of you who're single: whatever you do, don't give your heart away to someone who won't share your faith.
4. Noted marriage author and speaker John Gottman highlights this truth in his book The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work, (Three Rivers Press, 2000), p. 243.
5. For example, we may dream of becoming wealthy together, having 2.5 kids, a nice house in a nice neighborhood, to raise the "perfect" children, or pursue great civic or community work. The problem is that none of these things provides a permanent foundation for life: wealth can't buy meaning or purpose; children grow up and move away; and even civic service (while noble) can become mere "busy work" if it's not seen as part of a higher purpose.
6. Pastor Adam Hamilton says that "*A healthy... marriage needs a partnership with God in order to thrive and last... [And] a strong relationship with Jesus Christ is the foundation*" for this alone (Adam Hamilton, Making Love Last A Lifetime, p. 116). Spiritually mature married couples understand that they can accomplish more in service for God as husband and wife than either of them could ever accomplish by ourselves. In like fashion, author Elizabeth Newenhuysen once wrote that "*Marriage... calls for faith of the*

*most radical sort*” (Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse, Marriage Partnership, Vol. 5, no. 1). Philosopher Antoine De Saint-Exupery once wrote that “*Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.*” For the Christian, that “direction” is towards Christ himself.

7. Our spouse is the one person above all others whom God has called us to minister to, to bless, and to encourage. So Christian marriage is certainly a call to serve our mate. But it’s ALSO a call to allow our relationship *with* our mate to help us better serve GOD and OTHERS. In his book on which this series is based, Adam Hamilton says that “*Marriage is not an act of love, but an act of discipleship, faithfulness, service, and obedience to God*” (Adam Hamilton, Making Love Last A Lifetime, p. 118). So if God has called you to be married (even if you didn’t understand it as a calling at first), then it’s because in His plan for your life, you can do and accomplish *more* to serve Him and His kingdom *together* with your mate than either one of you could do alone.

In our case, my wife and I have been able to make it through the good days and bad, through pain and difficulty, joy and sorrow, children and church moves, in large part, I believe, because we’ve been able to share *a common goal / task* of serving God in Christ by serving others through His church. Such things could include things like serving together at M.U.S.T. ministries, going on a mission trip to M.A.P., Mountain T.O.P., or Kenya, serving in our church’s Homebound ministry, teaching little children or youth together in Sunday School, Children’s Church, or Youth Group, or any host of other activities that focus on serving others. You see, when husbands and wives see this and begin to focus on what the two of them can do together to serve God in the world, then suddenly they begin to rise above the selfish focus that plagues so many marriages today.

8. Much of what I do as your pastor is due to the partnership that I share with Trish – we both see “my” ministry here at East Cobb UMC as a *shared* ministry.

9. It’s a mystery to me, but I’ve noticed that the times I feel most in love with Trish are the times that I feel closest to Christ, and I suspect that the closest we’ll ever be to each other is that day when we meet at the foot of God’s throne in heaven, having shared a lifetime serving Him together through His church.

10. This same thing can happen in any type of relationship (i.e., friendship, family relationship, etc.) when we put God and Jesus at the center. Of course, we can’t experience the joy and blessings of all that I’ve been talking about so far if the individuals who make up a couple aren’t pursuing the same goal (i.e., Christ). For example, if you’re pursuing Christ and they’re pursuing another lifestyle, then you’re heading in one direction and they heading in a different one, and it’s going to be very difficult for your relationship to survive the long haul because the two of you are growing *apart*, rather than *towards* each other.

11. You see, *relationships* need salvation just as *individuals* do. Statistics prove this. For example, the divorce rate among Christians/church-goers is arguably as high as that of non-Christians. [See “U.S. Divorce Rates for various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas” on the website of ReligiousTolerance.org ([www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_dira.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm)) See also the August 6, 2001 article “Born-Again Christians Less Likely to Co-Habit, Just As Likely To Divorce,” published in “The Barna Update” of “The Barna Research Group” ([www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=95](http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=95))]. WHY is this possibly true? I believe it could be because while we as Christians might have given our own *personal* lives to God, we haven’t learned how to truly give Him our *relationships*.

12. Throughout the New Testament, the early church dealt not only with “spiritual” issues such as sin, salvation, redemption, etc., but also with the physical ramifications and contexts of those issues (Read the entire book of 1 Corinthians, for example). This included ways that the early church helped couples in their marriages in practical ways. In the same way, at its best today the church offers opportunities for persons to positively grow and develop in their relationships with one another, including marriage through a variety of ministries and programs. In fact, a truly Christ-like marriage is intended to be a sort of “church in miniature”: a place and relationship where two people can grow and be supported and encouraged in their Christian journey – a kind of “home base” that one can return to for refreshment/renewal before facing the world.

13. In other words, learn your spouse's "love language" and begin to speak it. In his book The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1995), author Gary Chapman argues that there are five primary "love languages" that all people "speak" – (1) Words of Affirmation; (2) Quality Time; (3) Receiving Gifts; (4) Acts of Service; (5) Physical Touch – and that as we learn to "speak" our spouse's language we find we can communicate our love for them in a way that THEY can understand and appreciate.

As an example of this principle in practice, in his book Making Love Last A Lifetime, Pastor Adam Hamilton tells the true story about a woman at his church who's husband ridiculed her for her faith and church-going habits. But after hearing Adam preach about this, she decided to start speaking her husband's primary love language by giving herself to him more and more passionately in physical/sexual intimacy. And she let him know that she could do this because of her Christian faith. And Rev. Hamilton says that this tangible expression of love literally transformed him, for he now attends church with her and has even given his own heart and life to Jesus.

14. We find this process of the faith of the believing mate "rubbing off" on the non-believing mate described in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.